After narrowly escaping an assassination attempt, Corvo insists Emily needs a new teacher; a skilled assassin, who can show her how to survive even the most deadly of attacks. However, the man he has in mind has been retired for over ten years, to say nothing of his history with their family.

Complete, now with Holiday Season Post-Epilogue update!

Notes

Because I am weak garbage and I love Emily Kaldwin with all my heart I set myself the challenge of 'what cranky old man can I ship her with' and then accidentally created a vessel that I will captain all the way to the bottom of the sea.

Join me on the trash ocean.

Takes place approx 2-3 years before DH2, so Emily is 22-23 and Daud is 100% legit.
The First Lesson

When point of the knife sinks into Emily Kaldwin's back she cries out as much in surprise as pain. The next second she's drenched with blood that is not her own, running hot down her spine as she pulls away and reaches for the wound, feeling the new slit in her clothes with a strange sense of otherness.

Everything is chaos until she feels Corvo's arms close around her, then with a deafening roar they are on top of a roof.

“Emily,” he pants, hand pressing down over the spreading patch of blood in her coat. His other hand comes to her face, pulling it up to his. “Emily. Look at me.” She winces but meets his eyes, breathing shallow breaths.

“I'm all right,” she pants. “What happened?”

“I don’t know.” He sounds scared. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, I’m still here,” she says weakly, reaching for his hand to squeeze. “Just get us away from this place.” After a few minutes of stomach-churning blinking wrapped under his arm, they land at an infirmary and Corvo lets her throw up in a gutter before carrying her through the door.

“Make way for the Empress,” his voice booms across the ward. “She has just survived an assassination attempt.”

Hours pass while Emily Kaldwin’s wound is nursed like a colicky newborn.

She is lucky Corvo was there with piece of steel through the assassin’s throat, or she might have been in more serious trouble. While she’ll have to rest a while to let the wound to heal, the physical damage was only flesh-deep. The emotional damage, not so much.

Corvo has not left her side since, nor slept more than a few hours, and it shows in every tired line of him. She knows it is no small thing for him to take a life, and he’s tried so hard to keep his hands clean. Now she’s the reason for the blood and guilt she knows cannot be assuaged, because even that assassin had been someone.

“Go home, father,” she tells him as he drifts off against his own knotted fingers. “Not even you could get to my bedside without being noticed.”

"I doubt that.” Corvo stirs and rubs his eyes, mouth turned into an insistent frown that has not budged in long days and longer nights. “How are you feeling?” he asks, and she gives a sigh that stabs at the stitches in her back.

“Itchy,” she remarks, “but you need this bed more than I.”

“I’ve been thinking about what happened,” he says like he's chosen not to hear her. “There was nothing I could have done.”

“You saved my life.”

“It was too close,” he says. “My training has failed you.”
“You haven’t failed me,” she sighs. “It was just a little… stabbing.” Outsider knows he’d been stabbed enough. She once watched him take a dagger to the forearm and finish his drink before pulling it back out.

“Even so,” he presses, “something needs to be done.”

“Yes,” she agrees, “you need to go home and get some sleep.” She sits up in bed, pulling together her bravest face for him.

“You aren’t experienced enough in defending skilled assassins,” he diagnoses, like he’s spent long enough around doctors to start thinking he is one.

“Thank you for that observation,” she remarks with politeness that suggests she means the opposite. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“You need a new teacher.” He looks up at her with remorse she can’t understand. “A master assassin.”

“What are you talking about?” she despairs. “You’re half-mad, father, please just go somewhere else and rest.” He is stressing her just to look at.

“I have an idea,” he continues with ringing clarity, “but you’re not going to like it.”

She throws a tray of crystal glasses when he tells her what he wants her to do.

“Never!” she spits as he puts up a hand against the assault, the glasses shattering on the floor and summoning a fleet of nervous guards and doctors, all of whom he sees off with a seething glare and few stomps to herd them back out of the door they came through.

“You know this gives me no joy,” he replies evenly, turning back to face her with apology in his eyes, “but it is what needs to be done.”

“No!” She is defiant. “The very man who!” She’s unable to finish.

“I know,” he says, more pained with every moment, “but there will be more assassins. There will always be more assassins.” They had no leads on who was behind this one, but speculation between the political factions and gangs was prolific. “Not even I am enough to stop them all.” She hasn’t seen him smile since the attack, and though he usually wears a frown as his resting face, this is a new level of torment.

“I’ll train harder,” she insists, “something else, anything else.”

“I have thought it over too many times,” he explains in his careful, unbearably serious way. “The choice is yours, but he was the best there’s ever been.”

“And he killed my mother!” she bellows. “Yes,” says Corvo, “and if he cannot kill you, who do you have left to fear?”

Emily swallows bitter spit and forces herself back in the bed. She’d be a liar to say she hasn’t had nightmares where she watches herself from a child’s eyes as she is beaten and impaled on the sword of that terrifying scarred man. What she would do for dreams where she doesn’t die her mother’s death on the cold ground.
“I’ll need to think about it,” she says quietly.

“I understand,” he answers, and perhaps having broken this wretched truth, at last begins to gather his things and pack up the temporary campsite he has assembled at her bedside for the past week. He pauses at the door. “If you need anything-”

“Go to sleep, father,” she nags. “I’ll call for you as soon as I wake up.”

“Very well.” It is obvious how he forces himself to accept this. “Then… goodnight.”

She delivers it like a warning shot into the doorframe. “Goodnight.”

Emily is on her feet long before she is officially cleared to do so by her flapping gaggle of physicians, but when she is at last able to stroll outdoors without setting them a-squawking, she takes a walk in the gardens with her father.

“The cabinet will lose their minds,” she tells him without context.

“They do not need to know,” he replies without needing it. “You will merely be resting on the Southern Isles to recover from your injuries.”

“I’m fine,” she groans. It was one little dagger in the back, which she was more than sick of hearing about.

The kingdom had been in uproar, with fighting in the streets between factions assumed to have some part in the crime; a vigil of well-wishers in the city square that guards had needed to disband after the fourth day of emotional outpouring; artists painting portraits of her sickbed, most of which were exaggerated beyond reason and would end up on the fire if she had any say in the matter.

She concludes, “So, you’re telling me to lie to my advisors?”

“They wouldn’t understand,” he answers openly. “Besides, if you are on a ship quickly enough they will only have me to argue with.” They hated doing that. Not that Corvo didn’t listen, or outright bullied them, but he dissected their intentions so methodically few left without bearing their true motives like a standard in a parade of fools. Many a comment was made in parliament that the Lord Protector would be better named the Lord Impenetrable Fortress.

“Not so fast,” she says, dragging him down to her pace in both reason and walking speed. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“If you are considering the politics, you have accepted it already,” he replies, and she hates that he is probably right.

“He might refuse.”

“He won’t.”

“I might not find him.”

“You will.” He holds out two pieces of paper; a map, and a wax sealed letter, addressed to only one name – Daud.

She leaves on the first ship out of Dunwall after dark.
She tracks him to a village in the Serkonian hills, only to find most people have no idea the man she’s seeking even exists. Rumours send her hiking up hard trails under a baking sun, thankful for the time she had to heal in a secluded cabin on the ship that ferried her here.

She has not seen a building or person in half a day when, over the ridge pointed out at her last calling post, a house of ancient stones rises. She has seen ruins scattered across these lands, but this one has been painstakingly repaired and seems at odds with the rawness of its surroundings. A villa clinging to a hillside half way up a mountain, watching over vineyards and groves of figs and olives.

Arriving sweaty and with her wound itching something terrible, she slings her pack against a wall and starts to round the building in search of something to drink. She hears footsteps behind her – Corvo has told her this means he wants to be heard.

“What are you doing on my land?” The voice is beyond ragged, and she would like to say she remembers it, but he was silent the only time they met.

He delivers this idle threat to her back, while she is still a stranger, but when she turns around to be recognised his composure is blasted like dynamite on a cliff face.

There are many better, wiser things she could say, but what she does is, “Remember me?”

As he stares at her with eyes wide, she realises she doesn’t know what she was expecting; that he should tell her he’s sorry and put a bullet in his temple, or that he should run a blade through her gut instead. Certainly not that he should look like a farmer who has just returned from the fields, with a straw hat hanging off his back and dirt streaked through his silvering hair.

“Oh, of course.” He pauses for a breath she thinks he takes to steady himself. “Get out of here.”

“Corvo sent me.”

“I don’t care,” he growls. “Leave an old man be.” He steps backwards, then tearing his eyes away puts his back to her and walks.

“I need you to teach me,” she says, cold and clear, and he freezes in his clumpy leather sandals.

“What?” He still doesn’t look at her.

“It wasn’t my idea,” she notes, wiping sweat from her forehead and coming it back through her hair. “In fact, would be a great deal easier for me if you refuse.”

“Good,” he rasps, half-turning to catch her eye. “I refuse.”

This entire awful exchange nearly done, she reaches into a jacket that screams ‘foreigner’ in this land and presents a note to him, sealed with the insignia of the Lord Protector, unbroken.

“Corvo said if you refused to give you this,” she recites begrudgingly. “You have to read it before I can go home.” It’d taken her days to find him, on top of the sea voyage to Serkonos, and she is not relishing the arduous trip back – though it beats the alternative. He reaches for the paper but stops short of taking it, like he is afraid to touch her.

She huffs and pushes it into his fingers, which snap shut like a trap. Tearing open the weather-
softened wax, he reads the single line of text written inside, his face barely changing, and shoves the note into the pocket of rough-hewn trousers.

“I’ll do it,” he says sourly.

“Good, then I hope to never see you-… what?” She can’t, or won’t, believe her ears.

“I’ll do it,” he repeats. “So you need to learn how to escape the assassin’s blade?”

“Well… yes,” she mutters, and in a heartbeat he has her back against the wall, wound stabbing at her in protest from one side, and a knife at her throat from the other.

“Then you better start learning,” he growls. “I could have killed you ten different ways since you walked up.” She grabs his wrist and pushes his hand away crossly; he had no killer intent, but it was an obtuse way to make a point.

“We haven’t started yet,” she argues, tilting her chin up at him. She knows how much she resembles her mother, and hopes it makes his blood run cold. Like staring at a ghost.

“Always be on your guard,” he replies without wavering. “That’s your first lesson.”
Emily Kaldwin begrudgingly follows her mother's assassin around a rustic villa in the Serkonian hills that he's called home for the past decade.

Only Corvo could conceive that anything as mad as this might work - and, as it turned out, maybe Daud too.

It seems like the world of adult!Emily pairings is but a small fleet at this stage, so here is my humble offering at the altar of May-December ships.

We must sail proudly over the seven trash seas in our garbage ship.

She follows Daud with her bag swinging heavily from one shoulder and feet that seem to weigh more every time she lifts them.

He wears clumpy sandals that shuck as he walks and the rough-hewn clothing of a farmhand, tanned anywhere that sees the sun and nothing like the air of a heartless killer. They pass under a wooden trellis that stands at the end of the house, dripping in fragrant summer blossoms that shelter the stone patio from a fierce Serkonian sun. Spying a tray of half potted plants as they walk past, she wonders if this could really be the Knife of Dunwall.

“I eat at six am and six pm,” he says so hoarsely it takes her a moment to process, and they pace through an open doorway into the aged stone house. “You’re welcome to fend for yourself if that isn’t to your liking.” Six am starts for no reason were never to her liking, but she doesn’t get the impression of sleeping easily with this man nearby.

She’s had a score of teachers in her life, even some that she was shipped off to like this, but they were masters of their arts and learned, worthy individuals. Nothing like Daud – though Corvo seems to consider him a master in the art of committing murder. It’s not a comforting thought.

“Take any of the rooms upstairs,” he continues as they stop by a narrow staircase: warped wooden steps tucked between sturdy columns. For all her efforts she cannot read him. Can't understand why he is doing this, or why he thinks it is appropriate to invite her into his home when he should be twelve years dead – like her mother.

“I should thank you, I suppose,” she says, begrudging every bit of etiquette that has been impressed upon her.

“Spare me,” he snaps, which is somewhat relieving, though his vitriol isn’t. “I’m not doing this for thanks.”
“Then why are you?” she dares to ask, shooting straight. He is weathered by sun and scars, but his eyes are clear and lips unmoving as he returns her gaze. “Fine, don’t tell me,” she huffs, shouldering her bag and walking past him to climb the stairs.

She gets maybe two steps before she hears a noise and feels calloused fingertips touch either side of the back of her neck. Flinching away, she twists her wound and gives a muffled cry, tumbling back on the stairs as she loses her balance in the closed space. She breaks her fall with her hands, but this leaves a proverbial red carpet for him to point a dagger at her face.

“But I could kill you twice before you reach the top of the stairs,” he says in a low, dangerous rasp. “Corvo is right. You do need my help.”

“I don’t need anything from you,” she says with a wince disguised as a scowl, getting carefully back up without wrenching her injury again.

“You’re injured.” His eyes are as keen as the assassin’s blade that’d put her here.

“Why else would I be here?” she returns curtly. “Only desperate times call for a measure as unsavoury as this.” She throws the insult liberally, but cannot know if she’s hit her mark from his stony expression. His eyes linger on her face for a moment, but he doesn’t hold her gaze for long and they soon flit up the stairs behind her.

“I rarely use the upper floor, so have free roam of it,” he says like the gracious host he is not and welcome guest she isn’t.

“Why?” she asks suspiciously, fearing what she might find.

“It gets hot,” he answers rather dully, “and I’ve no need for the space.”

“What about the rest?” she dares ask. From the looks of it the estate is quite sizable.

“Do as you please about the grounds, but stay away from my quarters.” His voice is in tatters, breaking like it hasn’t been taken out in some time, but like the huge frayed cords at the docks holds strong.

That won’t be a problem, she thinks, but says, “Can I trust you to extend the same courtesy?”

“No,” he answers bluntly.

“No?” She goes into a royal tone, reserved for specific occasions outside of public appearance. “That hardly seem appropriate.” For a moment she sees the mask he holds his face in drop, and under her steely eye doubt chases across his countenance.

“Assassins aren’t famed for courtesy,” he mutters, perhaps even uncomfortably, before adding, “In practice I’ll leave you be.”

“I should think so,” she delivers in her finest Empress register, then with as much dignity as possible lifts her pack under one arm and turns back up the stairs.

She’s not taken more than a few steps when he strikes again, prodding her over the bandage that lies under her shirt and jacket; not too hard, but enough to send a jolt of electricity up her back. She sucks air through her teeth and thinks several curses she doesn’t let slip.

“Three times,” he says over her shoulder, stepping away again. She didn’t even hear him move this time. “If you can’t cover for your injuries then you place the assassin’s blade yourself.” More than
anything, she wants to shove him down the stairs.

“I hope my father is right about you,” she says under her breath.

“Me too,” she thinks she hears him reply.

She manages to survive the rest of the climb and finds dust and cobwebs on the window sills of the upstairs, though the floor has been somewhat recently swept. Opening the first door provides her a room in which to sleep, furnished with a low bed and view out over the hills. Her bag hits the floor with a thump and the door finds itself back in the frame even harder. This is not how she expected things to turn out.

Not for the first time, she rues her father's twisted plan to send her here; he'd agreed in good faith that should Daud refuse she could come straight back to Dunwall, probably knowing he would accept upon reading whatever the wretched note said. Now she finds herself under the presumed tutelage of the assassin who murdered her mother.

She changes her clothes and scrubs her face as best she can without water, then taking a large bowl from the table creeps downstairs in search of a place to fill it up. She feels like a ghost, or that maybe he is, tiptoeing around waiting for something to happen. However, she is also hungry, and seeing a loaf of bread on a counter next to a knife helps herself.

Hearing the flapping of sandals sends her composure to the four winds, but as quickly as she hears footsteps they stop. She isn’t foolish enough to think that means he has, and tries not to telegraph as she anticipates where he will come from.

She turns with a breadknife just in time to parry his own weapon, rushing as usual for her neck.

“Now you’re getting it,” he dares to commend, which for any other teacher she would be satisfied by, but not with him. Whatever he wants, she wants the opposite.

She feels a nudge between her ribs, and sees how he has slipped his other hand up to her as softly as serpent, poised to deliver a lethal blow. “Four.”

How she hates that he is counting.

In the afternoon of her arrival, Daud kills Emily twenty three times, leaving her exhausted and furious by the evening. The first overpowers the latter when he spoons stew into a bowl from a stone pot over the hearth, and comments to the empty space next to him that she can do the same. She may prefer to be literally anywhere else in the world, but she still needs to eat.

In her own home she would take the dish away with her and sulk in some quiet corner in peace, but these are new surroundings so she swallows her hate with vegetables at a blocky wooden table, resenting the familiarity of the spices and grateful that he leaves without a word half-way through.

She finishes and washes up with a full belly and long day of travel weighing her down. There’s a slight rush of air that tells her he’s made another of his wretched attempts, but she cannot muster the energy to care. Turning lazily into the edge against her neck, she notices how carefully he backs it away, not expecting her to walk her own throat against a kitchen knife.

“I’m tired,” she says dully, refusing to look at the meat cleaver he uses to make his infernal point – you would be dead if I so wished.
"Nice excuse," he comments raggedly, laying the cleaver back down. "Twenty-four."

“I hope you can restrain yourself from raising the counter while I'm asleep,” she snaps with a freer tongue than a less tired her might have permitted.

“I…” he stops at the same time as he starts, making a strangled sound that would be of mild interest to someone not looking to leave his company as soon as possible. By the time he answers she’s already turned away.

For all her fatigue sleep does not come easily, and she spends hours staring out of the window as the light dies over the hills, fading from brown to blue into black. There are no lights in the landscape aside from this house, and she wonders if that is intentional. Corvo has told her the story of his mercy and Daud’s promises to disappear, to spill no more blood.

She considers if having no one else around is for his own good or theirs.

When she does sleep, she dreams of the pagoda-turned mausoleum that is a fixture in her mind. Her mother stands in front of her to enact the same-old nightmare, but when Daud blinks in he wears a straw hat and the clothing of a labourer, and where he should wield a sword to pierce her belly he carries a loaf of bread. It doesn't prevent him from completing his work, and she wakes up drenched in sweat, unused to the hot nights and unfamiliar surroundings.

When dawn has long since passed the horizon she goes downstairs to find half a freshly baked loaf of bread and bowl of figs, which she eats with the pretense of not being on her account.

The kitchen is cool from the stone walls and floor, fitted out with whitewashed plaster and old stained wood, and when she steps outside the heat presses over her like a blanket. The terrace at the end the house drips with bright flowers, their scent carrying on a dry breeze.

The climate is far from Gristol, and she immediately sheds the jacket she put on out of habit. There’s a heavy work table no longer covered in potting supplies, and even a hammock strung between two posts of the trellis, swinging gently in the wind. At the end of the stone patio the land starts to slope away, leading into groves of fruit bearing trees overlooking a great valley.

Walking down one of the sheltered pathways, for a short time this could have been the health retreat her advisors and the Kingdom had been informed of. It wasn’t as if she couldn’t use an escape from the capitol; between warring factions in the parliament and shaken peace in Morely, to say nothing of the unrelenting pressure of her position as the sole inheritor of her line, she's almost relieved to look out over the hills and see no other signs of life.

This peace is shortlived when out of the cover of a nearby tree thrusts a hand holding a trowel as if it’s a dagger. She shifts and manages to catch his wrist, leaving her with the flat of the gardening tool flush against her neck. His forearm is lean and tan, speckled with sun-spots and all sinew.

“Too slow,” he says from deep in his chest.

“You can’t know that,” she replies.

“I can,” he replies, letting the weapon drop. “It was my business to know.”

“Fine,” she huffs like she’s spitting out a tooth knocked loose from her head.

He turns away and vanishes, but she assumes he follows and drifts ever-closer to the edge of her nerves, anticipating the next strike and swearing this one she will evade. A rustle in the leaves nearby cracks her head like a whip in the direction of the noise, only to feel his rough fingertips
against the back of her neck as she turns neatly into the trap.

“You let your instincts rule you,” he murmurs, and her instincts are telling her to pull out a pistol and fill him with lead. When she has turned around he’s already disappeared back into the trees.

“Instincts,” she mutters to herself, stomping harder into the dirt as she looks for the end of the grounds. Aside from the ambushes, she nearly enjoys strolling through the orchard, pulling ripe fruit from the trees and spitting stones as she goes.

The next time he leaps out of nowhere, she hits the ground as fast as she can, rolling against the slope and ending up behind the trunk of the nearest tree. It is only when he makes a noise that can't be construed as disapproval that she realises she’s survived.

However, she’s barely a few feet further down the hill when he drops out of a tree, landing a heavy hand on her shoulder; it is particularly infuriating that he uses such lazy stand-ins for lethal force. Like a reminder of how easy this is for him.

In the time it takes her to walk to the end of the grounds and back, marked with a haphazardly repaired dry stone wall, she has lived just four times and died twelve. Her temper has been burned to a crisp, with the heat and her ill-suited clothing from Dunwall doing nothing for her humour.

She takes a bucket to the pump of a nearby outbuilding, pulling up fresh groundwater against yellow brickwork covered in bright pink flowers. The first bucket goes straight over her head, and she pushes away sodden hair, welcoming the streams of water down her back. Filling it again, she heads up to her room and peels the sweaty clothes from her body, washing both in the clear water that doesn’t need to be boiled or taste of chalk.

She lays out her wet things on the clay tile roof under her window and goes back outside with temper somewhat abated, wearing one layer where she’d normally have three. In spite of her father’s warnings, she has only a few things suited to this climate.

What she does bring with her is her pistol and small sword, so when she walks out to find Daud sitting at the table under the terrace eating an apple with a knife, rather than avoid him she sits square in front and aggressively thumps both down on the tabletop.

“Feel safer?” he challenges, casting only a sparing glance at her weapons.

“Yes,” she says adamantly, and when he smirks she wants nothing more than to run him through.

“You shouldn’t,” he says, holding her gaze for an excruciating moment before the stillness breaks. She reaches for the pistol as he snatches the sword, and they point each at the other’s face.

“I win,” she claims.

“Is that what you think?” he remarks. She wants to scream or pull the trigger, or both. He circles the point of the sword in her face. "I'd run you through by the time you fire."

"Then we both lose," she counters.

"Assassins are disposable," he points out. "There's just one of you, and I doubt you could hit me anyway."

“You make it tempting to try,” she says through gritted teeth. To her fury, he lets down the sword and leaves it equally between them, returning to his apple like he couldn’t care less.
“You’re not trying to kill me?” he asks with something like sincerity, staring down the barrel of her gun. “No wonder your instincts are awful.” He stabs his knife into the tabletop and leaves it stuck there.

“You have a deathwish, then?” she threatens, pulling back the hammer.

“Emily Kaldwin,” he breathes her name for the first time since she’s arrived, and it makes her blood boil. “I’d like to see you try.”

She pulls the trigger. And misses.

Daud straightens up and grabs her hand as she reaches for the sword, swinging wide and pushing her wrist against the edge of his knife, still jammed firmly into the table. He snatches her sword with his other hand and raises the tip to touch gently under her chin, surprisingly dexterous on the wrong side. It’s all she can do not to spit at him.

“I hate you,” she hisses, but his expression doesn’t change – he surely knows it.

“Then put me out of my misery,” he retorts. “I can’t think of anyone more deserving of that satisfaction.” He lets go of her wrist, which she pulls jealously into the cradle of her hand. “That’s your next lesson,” he crows as he gets up. “Always fight to kill.”

“I’m not a murderer,” she counters. Like you, she almost adds, but doubts it would get her a reaction. He knows the blood to his name better than anyone.

“If you can’t fight to kill, then you die,” he says bluntly, and stepping around the table seems for the first time like the monster behind the tales parents tell their children at night. “So if you’re going to kill me, then just do it.” He rips his knife up and plunges it all the way through the half-eaten apple so quick it makes her jump, lifting the fruit bleeding juice as he walks away.

Carried back on the warm summer breeze, she’s sure she hears him add, “If you can.”
The Third Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily Kaldwin steps out under the baking Serkonian sun armed to the teeth - very well, if Daud wants her to kill him then she'll damn well try.

Unfortunately, it's proving to be more difficult than she imagined.

Chapter Notes

I don't have much to say except that I love writing this and it's going to be an (Outsider voice) *interesting* journey.

Within three days Emily Kaldwin has died a hundred times and explored the entirety of Daud’s estate, if it can be called that. Farmstead seems more appropriate.

From the long groves of fruit and olive-bearing trees to unworked land ruled by long grasses, scattered outhouses in various states of disrepair, and even a walled garden that was locked when he was not in it and that she hadn’t dared approach when he was, everything spoke of a self-sufficient rural existence. She hasn't seen another living soul, at least not beyond the wildlife.

Interaction with her only company has been limited to spats of violence, most of which were over before they'd started with his brusque demonstrations of her failings. Her attempts to kill him have resulted in her cutting a great deal of air, only fuelling her frustration until the mere sight of Daud makes her blood run hot - not something she needs help with given the unforgiving climate.

At midday it gets so sweltering she often gives up the notion of doing anything except laying down in the shade and possibly falling asleep. She's woken up with a knife at her throat more than once for that indulgence; unless she retreats all the way to her stuffy, first floor room where the breeze doesn't reach and that suffocates her even at night.

The evenings are horribly dull with no entertainment to speak of, and she foolishly brought no books for the weight of her bag. She’s fully explored the top floor of the house, but aside from the first couple of doors, which contain the same sparse furniture as her own room, they were empty. She wonders if the rooms had started being furnished for guests then stopped when it became evident he wouldn't have any.

She misses her friends, her handmaids, and even her advisors in rare moments of madness. Most of all, she misses her father, and one night when she wakes under an oppressively bright moon feeling particularly alone, she climbs out onto the roof from her window and allows herself to cry.

The following morning she goes downstairs only to find Daud in the kitchen drinking coffee. Their routines have been not accidentally out of sync – two strangers begrudgingly occupying the same space – and it feels like an intrusion that he should be there, even though this is his house.
He pays her no notice and she tries to do the same for a few futile moments, but she wants nothing more than for him to leave, so without further provocation draws her weapon.

“Starting so soon?” he says as he sips lazily from a tin cup. “Can't a man finish his coffee?”

“You forget your first lesson,” she spits, and goes for him anyway. The coffee cascades through the air and a loud chink precedes the splatter of liquid on the stone floor as he blocks her lunge with the mug, knocking her blade away with relative ease.

Normally that would be the end of it, but they are indoors and he's got nowhere to disappear to for once. She recovers and strikes a second time, which he also blocks with his makeshift buckler.

Undeterred she goes for a thrust, but he merely brushes the point of her rapier away, narrowly missing his shoulder as he steps into her and curves an arm around her waist to grab the dagger strapped to the back of her hip.

She pushes him off but he's already teased it free, and next time she goes for him suffers the indignity of being countered with her own weapon. It stings that he feels no need to carry his own, when it’s apparently just as easy to steal hers.

She steps back and parries, taking advantage of the range she has on him and keeping her distance. He fights not entirely unlike Corvo, all aggression and invasion of space, but she knows how to stay afloat and keep her distance.

They pace around the kitchen trading blows in the longest bout they've ever had, but it ends suddenly when he makes a brash, careless move to try and beat her on power and speed alone. A move so mannishly simple that she's been dealing with it since she was twelve, sparring with the guardsmen under her father’s careful eye.

With a practiced turn of her wrist she slides her rapier along the edge of the dagger and stops only when the point digs into his chest, undoubtedly sharp through the light cotton clothing that she continues to envy.

Realising his mistake, he steps back and vanishes into the void – but she has not been neglected in her training, and slides her foot back and turns to block the strike she knows will come from directly behind her.

He clearly doesn’t expect her to confidently knock his hand off course with her guard, because he is left wide open and this time she aims the point of her sword for his throat. She holds it – and his gaze – for a second, then pushes down and stabs into nothing. He blinks again and clumsily lands several feet away from where he stood.

She meets his eyes triumphant, and if she isn't mistaken he could be out of breath.

“You're good,” he says like it's a surprise.

She rolls her eyes and asks, “Did you forget who trained me?”

“Why didn't you fight like that before?” he says with salt in his tone, like he’s still got nothing but criticism in spite of the fact that she won.

“You haven't given me the chance.”

“Clearly, only fools would give you a chance,” he returns, and there's a hint of something in his voice that sets her teeth on edge – it’s almost complimentary, if it weren’t so bitter. “You have to
“See to what?” she asks with barely disguised impetuosity.

“Whatever it is you need,” he answers, and his edge begins to soften as he inspects the dented coffee cup. “There’s usually only two things you can do – run or fight.” He goes to refill his cup from the coffee pot, testing it’s still watertight and taking an experimental sip as he continues. “You have to choose which it’s going to be, and not let your gut decide for you.”

“So I just have to overcome my primal instincts,” she mocks. “Sounds simple enough.”

“That isn’t it,” he contests with something that rings closer to small talk than argument for once, taking a small wooden pot and slipping off the lid to spoon sugar into his cup. “You should always know which is in your favour, so when it happens the decision has already been made.”

“I’m meant to live constantly in fear of an attack?” she derives.

“I didn't say anything about fear,” he retorts. “Rule your instincts, don’t be ruled by them.”

“You talk a lot of theory for someone who doesn't teach it.”

“Theory is for classrooms,” he dismisses, “and I'm not your schoolmaster.” That was more than evident.

“Even if I choose to fight, all you do is run,” she complains, thinking this might be the longest conversation they've ever had.

“Then chase me,” he replies with a shrug, and takes a leisurely sip of his coffee. “If you let an assassin escape, that leaves one more in the world to come back for you.”

“Is that what my father did?” she dares to ask. He looks at her for a long, silent moment as he takes another drink before answering.

“Corvo killed the assassin that night.”

Taking him in, as he leans back against the counter sipping from his dented cup, dressed like a gardener, she could almost believe that was true. Almost.

“Anyway,” she shifts after the pause becomes too laden to leave unattended, “I'm here to learn how to evade assassins, not kill them.”

“They're sides of the same coin,” he answers, draining his mug and setting it down. “If you're serious about this, come at me like that every time.” He heads to the door, pausing with a hand on the frame before he steps out. “Then maybe we'll start getting somewhere.”

The moment he’s left she gets up to jealously pour herself a cup of coffee, not daring to help herself with him watching. She drinks it contemplating whether she should feel angrier than she does, but the impetus that drove her sword into her hand has been satiated by beating him for once.

She sets out victorious for her morning walk, but knowing this is a time he likes to strike keeps her hands twitching near her weapon. She is getting better at sensing when he is about to move on her, half-dropping every time as much as a breeze teases by.

When he does pounce, she hits the floor and doesn't stop there, ripping out her dagger to block the swing of a trowel for her head, sounding out a brash chink as she keeps her life.
He makes a few more lacklustre swipes that she deflects like brushing crumbs from her jacket, and it might be that he moves slower than he did in the kitchen. He stops like he can’t be bothered any more, lazy as the heat builds toward the middle of the day.

“Better,” he says in a way that manages to be disapproving even in its affirmation, then walks off in his usual fashion. She rolls her eyes – a habit Callista scolds her for even now.

The next time he moves on her she gets as far as dropping toward the ground, only to lay her throat neatly in his open hand, waiting to catch her like a rabbit in a snare.

“You get predictable, you die,” he chides, his palm hot and rough against her skin.

She shoves his hand away crossly, heart pounding and fighting the urge to shudder. Pacing away from him, she mops sweat from her forehead with a sleeve and tries to fan her face.

“I…need to lie down,” she fumbles, short of breath and fearing heat stroke. He squints and his crows’ feet draw together like purse strings. He’s aged more obviously than her father has, hair cut with silver and face weathered by a decade of these summers.

“Something wrong?” he asks, and she wants to berate him for breaking habit and daring to sound like he could care.

“I’m fine,” she snaps. “It’s just the heat.” He takes this as his signal to leave with a wary eye, and she goes to her room, laying a wet cloth over her head before falling asleep.

Waking sometime after the heat of the day is past its worst, Emily changes into a shirt that she would consider an undergarment back in Dunwall and heads back out.

A quick scan of the grounds suggests Daud is in the walled enclosure she has not dared to approach yet, but with a lack of anything better to do she creeps quietly up to the back wall. With a finely tuned ear she can hear the shuffling of someone moving earth and strange rhythmic thumps.

She inspects the coarse brickwork for holds and carefully begins to scale the wall, peering over the top to find the small compound contains all manner of vegetables and herbs, wrapped around a wooden frame covered in leaky piping. She’d been wondering where the produce that fills his meals came from.

He faces away from her, on his knees, digging things out of the earth and throwing them into a basket. Resting her chin on her hands on the very edge of the wall, she allows herself to puzzle him once more - could this really be the infamous assassin, pulling potatoes out of the ground with his bare hands?

No sooner is she lost in thought than a small spud bounces off the middle of her forehead, almost startling her off the wall, though it wasn’t thrown particularly hard.

“You’re dead,” he says into the ground. She props herself up on her elbows and takes a better look at the garden that literally bursts with life.

“Why is it behind a wall?” she dares to ask.

His answer is concise. “Rabbits.”

She swings her hips up to sit, watching him pull potatoes with an eye cut out for the next one he
throws at her, which she snatches out of the air and tosses back, bouncing off the side of the basket in a shameful near-miss.

“Now you’re dead,” she mimics, climbing to her feet to balance along the cobblestones on top of the wall.

“You missed,” he points out.

“Not if it was a grenade,” she lobbies. “You can’t actually kill me with a potato.”

“Oh?” he says as he throws a look up at her, holding her gaze for just long enough to make her think maybe he could. “Never assume,” he announces as he returns to dig. “That’s the third lesson.” No sooner has he spoken than he flings a huge spud trailing soil at her.

She catches it in one hand and throws it back with the other; however, he returns this with so much power she has to kick herself off the wall to avoid being hit, spinning an acrobatic turn and a half in the air before landing on the uneven ground below.

As she stands and rubs her stinging palms, she could swear she hears laughter from the other side of the wall.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to the wonderful Sylla and her top not first mate-ing of this here garbage ship we sailin’

She’s also writing a modern DH reincarnation thing called Lariat that if you aren’t reading why aren’t you reading it go do that.
The Fourth Lesson

Chapter Summary

It has been almost a week since Emily arrived at Daud’s house, and though he still pops out of shadows to remind her she’s meant to be learning something, there is a slowly emerging predictability about the days she spends there.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Outside of their ‘training’, Daud’s routine is something Emily could count on the fingers of one hand: wake, eat, work, eat, sleep. Though if she counts her own, it’s more or less the same – with more sleeping instead of work.

Groggy after napping too long, she walks onto the terrace to find the once infamous assassin – the Knife of Dunwall – using his talents with a blade to skin potatoes. For once, how strange a picture it makes is not her greatest concern.

She strolls to the end of the patio, under the roof of flowers that shade them from a villainous Serkonian sun, and remarks, “Vegetables again?” as if she’s talking to an imaginary friend.

“Vegetables are what I’ve got,” he answers with typical bluntness. “If you don’t like it you’re welcome to find something else.” She worries briefly about sounding ungrateful, then remembers who she’s dealing with.

“A little meat wouldn’t hurt,” she says carefully. “You did say there were rabbits.”

“It’d hurt them more than a little,” he replies with a wit as quick as his knife. “I don’t kill any more.”

“Not even rabbits?” she asks incredulously.

“Not even rabbits,” he says evenly, and seems to be the end of it until he adds, “Though I’ve been tempted,” like they have any right to converse.

“I’d certainly miss eating meat,” she responds like she’s any right to reply.

“It’s not that,” he counters, and she suspects they’ve spoken more in this day than all the ones before it put together. “They get into the garden and feast themselves,” he explains with a perfectly straight face. “Finding my food in the bellies of a dozen fat thieves is enough to tempt anyone to violence.”

He delivers it with such simmering irritation that she cannot help but laugh, then claps her hand over her mouth to silence the betrayal. There is maintaining a reasonable level of diplomacy with a potentially hostile party, and there is overfamiliarity.

“Well,” she says a little more stiffly, “if I caught one, would you cook it?”

“I’m not your chef.” If his voice were a blade, she'd have just nicked her finger on the edge.
“I should think not,” she replies loftily. “If a chef only gave me food for the rabbits, they would have long since left my employ.” Unexpectedly he cranks out the rumblings of a laugh, like an engine coughing before it starts.

“If you catch it, I can concede to cooking it,” he relinquishes, still slicing away at the potatoes she watched him dig earlier that day with precise twists of a knife. She keeps the flash of silver in the corner of her eye at all times; he hasn’t seem disposed to testing her mettle yet, though she’s ready if he were to try. Instead he tells her, “Be warned, they’re devious and quick.”

Like you, then, she thinks.

Daud was right about the rabbits.

It takes her over an hour and many failed attempts, as well as a suspicion that this is a waste of her dwindling ammunition, before Emily puts a kill shot in a hare. One lifeless eye gazes at the sky as she collects her quarry, and quietly haunts her as she heads back to the house in the fading evening light.

Although she knows the answer to the question of what could make someone go from life and a living of murder to refusing to spill the blood of even an animal, knowing doesn’t make the puzzle any simpler.

He’s no longer on the terrace when she returns from the hunt, but she finds him exactly where she expects him to be – over a fire in the kitchen stirring up stock.

“You know how to prepare that?” he says as soon as she comes in, bounty swinging from one hand.

“Of course,” she answers, “I did it all the time… when I was a child.”

She recalls survivalist camping trips with her father that she had adored – until the court started to murmur that it wasn’t usual for an Empress to spend so much time living like a beast in the forests with her father, especially not one as ‘eccentric’ as hers, and they were inevitably stopped.

“It’s your kill,” he says stonily.

“I know,” she snaps. “I’ll do it.” She thinks she can hear him scoff quietly into the fire, but cannot be sure over the crackle of charcoal.

Undeterred, she takes it to the counter and uses a large cleaver to take off the feet and head, then slices open the belly and starts skinning; by the time she’s got the fur off it’s unlikely to make a fetching piece for any noble.

Her shot also managed to pierce the poor creature's guts so the next job gets even messier, as she fishes entrails and half-digested grass out of the carcass. She finds the shot, which she drops to the counter with a thunk, and finally comes away bloody from the elbow down.

Washing the meat off in water, she comes up behind Daud as cautiously as if she were planning an attack. He silently holds out a hand and she passes her kill over, which he turns a couple of times before tossing the whole thing into the pot.

She stands for a moment watching it bob up and down, but feels too close and backs away. Like
the empty space between them is too precisely cut to fit together outside of combat.

“Make sure you clean my counter,” he says with his back to her.

“I was going to,” she lies, returning with ease to their usual hostility. Just because he wouldn't hurt a bunny doesn't make him anything for her to take, or treat, lightly.

She scrubs guts and viscera from the counter to throw outside, a meal for the wild dogs she has seen skirting around the place, and scrubs the top with water and a thick bristled brush.

While it's true that she doesn't normally have to hunt, gut and clean up after herself at home, she's far from coddled, and there’s something gratifying in the work. It’s straightforward in a way that diplomatic meetings and talk about the court profoundly aren’t.

She knows better than to assume that any semblance of civility with him is more than a smoke screen to shield the next attack, and leaves the cleaver within an arm's reach, handle turned towards her hand in addition to the dagger on her hip. Keeping an ear turned to the casual sounds of his presence, she finds herself weaving the order to fight through her body.

It is not when she hears something that she reacts, but when she does not. His absence is what sets her hand shooting for the cleaver, only to find she is holding the back of his.

“Nice idea,” he says close behind her, “but still too slow.” She grabs her dagger by the hilt and turns, whipping it out as he wrestles the cleaver from her grip.

She whips her freed hand across her front to deliver a backhander, clocking him sharp across the jaw and stepping forward to bring the dagger up to his throat in the moment of surprise it buys her. Their eyes meet for barely a second before he turns into nothing and blinks in on the other side of the room.

“Quick enough for you?” she taunts, and his expression has softened enough to permit him to raise his eyebrows at her.

“This time,” he replies, and it drives her up the wall that he can’t just admit when she’s won.

“Do the words ‘well done’ not feature in your vocabulary?” she comments, which he dares to openly scoff at.

“If you want kind words then Corvo sent you to the wrong man,” he says as he heads for the door. He is infuriating, and she grins through a tight jaw, pushing her etiquette out like claws.

“Manners cost nothing,” she recites in a way Callista would be proud of.

“If you’re doing something well you don’t need to be told,” he counters. “Don’t look to others to tell you that you’re doing a good job.” He pauses for a beat, then adds, “That’s your fourth lesson.”

“Lesson?” she scathes. “Please, you’re just making these up as you go along.”

A smirk seems to work its way between his lips for a moment, disappearing as he opens his mouth to say, “So?”
The next morning he catches her on the terrace foolishly without her swords. Even as she steps outside she's resolved not to run—giving away an easy death—and turns the full force of her fighting instincts on him instead.

His calculated stab to her ribs goes wildly off course when she wraps her fingers around the inside of his elbow and flips his momentum against him, turning the dagger away from her and locking his arm with a firm shove.

Although Corvo trained her and they share a fighting instinct, that doesn’t mean he taught her to fight like him—nor was he her only teacher in defensive arts. Where an attacker might have more power, she knows how to use it against them.

Her focus is solely on ending the bout in her favour when she hears the knife hit the floor and Daud give a hard hiss through his teeth. He blinks backwards with a hand to his side, around which a red patch emerges.

It takes her a moment before she looks down at her feet, where the dagger lies next to with a ridge of blood settled along the blade. His blood.

“Not bad,” he says with a wince. “You might’ve had someone with that one.”

“I… didn’t mean to,” the truth tumbles out in her surprise. She stays transfixed as he puts a hand on the tabletop to ease himself onto a bench, still pressing one hand over his side rather calmly all things considered.

She backs a single step away from him, followed by another, then with something made up of equal parts fear, panic and deep-rooted satisfaction, turns and runs into the house.

Chapter End Notes

I suppose this is a place to mention that we're going to be in this story for a while. The true joy of the trash ship is to burn it good and slowly, and make sure someone gets stabbed.
The Fifth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily Kaldwin celebrates the passing of a week under Daud’s unconventional tutelage with leftover rabbit stew and her most successful attempt to kill him yet.

When Emily finally makes up her mind and emerges from the house with haphazardly collected first aid, Daud sits under the mottled shade of the terrace with a trail of blood creeping from his shirt down to his leg, already drying at the edges in the mid-morning sun.

“Good, you found the brandy,” he says as he turns to face her, reaching for the bottle that she holds in one hand. She lets him take it largely out of confusion, unsure what to think when he pulls the cork out with his teeth and takes a long swig before anything else.

“That was for the wound,” she says lamely.

“Wouldn’t want to waste it,” he remarks, taking another leisurely slug before setting the bottle down, his other hand still pressed firmly to one side. He’s a little more tension in his voice, but remains only mildly concerned as he asks, “Would you mind getting some water?”

She’s half way to the pump before she considers that jumping on any word of his not like her, even if she has just stabbed him sort-of by accident. She reminds herself that he’s the one who has been telling her to try and kill him all this time, and guilt and indignation at even feeling guilty fail to establish a clear hierarchy as she fills a bucket.

When she returns to the terrace his shirt is bundled in one hand to stem the bloodflow from a wound she still hasn’t seen yet. She sets the bucket down and he dunks the garment, leaving a dull cloud behind, and wipes the sodden fabric up his side. Fresh blood runs down his skin in erratic rivulets, and she can just make out the slice she cut so easily. He keeps his blades sharp.

“I’ll need a knife,” he says like he’s asking after a hat, or a pair of sandals, “A hot one.”

“Is that necessary?” she challenges, knowing what he’s planning because it’s one of her father’s survivalist tips too. She hates the smell of burning flesh more than she can say – a horror rooted in her memory from the days of plague.

“It needs sealing.”

“It can be stitched.”

“Not by me.”

“By me.” She only realises the offer after she’s made it, and pauses to consider her actions more carefully. Crouching down, her fingers hover over his knuckles where he clenches fabric into a bloody wad. “Let me see,” she requests, and is mildly surprised when he complies. The cut wraps around his side almost at the bottom of his rib cage, deeper than she needs to know in specifics, and still bleeding something nasty.

“I can do it,” she tells him, putting the compress back. “I’ve supplies in my room.” She’s half way
back to the house before she turns over a shoulder to tell him, “Try not to move.’’

“I’ll bear that in mind,’’ he answers sarcastically, and she dashes upstairs to tear through her things for the medical kit she’s had little need of so far.

He’s drinking brandy again when she comes back, and from a distance she notices the fade in colour from his arms to chest, built up over many seasons under this demanding sun. She kneels beside him and sets down her things, then reaches for the bloody pulp that’s all that remains of his shirt, moving it and his hand in silent acquiescence as she checks on the bleeding.

The only really pale parts of him are scar tissue, running patchwork over his torso telling the story of a long and bloody life. She imagines it could have something to do with how he seems content to sip brandy and stare out over the hills like it could be the last time.

“This is going to be easier if you lie down,’’ she comments, and with a sigh that seems to be disappointment he turns to lay on the bench. She takes his brandy and soaks a rag that she wipes along the cut, making him hiss like a kettle.

“Easy, girl,’’ he mutters through clenched teeth, and she does it again only slightly out of spite. When she’s ready – or, more specifically, when she cannot take any longer without it being obvious she’s stalling – she threads the needle and carefully places the first stitch, earning herself another hiss. “Do you know what you’re doing?’’ he growls, and she hopes his anger is more about the pain than her.

“If I wanted to kill you, I wouldn’t do it with infection,’’ she replies caustically, which keeps him quiet as she sews him back together. Needlepoint happened to be a pastime one could get away with in court that had other applicable fields.

She rests a palm on his chest to still him when she needs to, tracking his heartbeat out of instinct. Her work is quick and quiet, eyebrows drawn together in concentration as she neatly ties off the stitches and presses a fresh wad of muslin over the top.

His fingers spread over hers as he puts a hand to the new dressing, which she awkwardly withdraws as he pulls himself upright, an unvoiced groan rumbling from his throat as he reaches for the bottle and steels himself with another drink.

“Sorry,’’ she offers experimentally, not sure if it will make her feel any better. The result is divisive.

“Don’t be,’’ he mutters as he gets carefully to his feet.

"No?’’ she says, thinking that she would probably want an apology out of someone who had just stabbed her.

“That’s the instinct that’ll keep you alive,’’ he delivers in such a glowing way it makes her glad she did it – proving he can’t take her lightly without paying the price.

As he walks carefully into the house, straight through to his quarters, she washes away what she can of the blood and sets about collecting some lunch, sparing the rabbits in light of the day’s bloodshed so far.

Eventually her scavenging becomes too uncomfortable as the heat of the day peaks, and with no sign of Daud – sleeping it off, perhaps – she decides to investigate the hammock. It’s a far better choice than her room, which she knows will be a tiny inferno.
Getting in is somewhat like climbing into a fishing net, and she thrashes more than she would feel dignified doing in front of company, but eventually succeeds in striking a comfortable position, swaying gently back and forth on the energy of her own efforts.

She realises she fell asleep when she wakes up staring down the point of a newly cleaned dagger, Daud’s shadow casting long across the terrace as he stands over her.

“Comfortable?” he asks, but she is too dazed to do anything more than put up her hand up and push the blade away.

“It’s hot upstairs,” she bemoans, wriggling in her sling and wanting nothing more than to turn over and go back to sleep. “I’m tired.”

“I can see that,” he remarks, and has to add, “Is it enough to die for?”

“Yes,” she answers petulantly, closing her eyes with the hope that he gets the hint. It's a gamble, but with a fresh injury to tend to she doesn't expect him to be persistent, and all he does is chuckle as he walks away. She briefly considers it’s strange he doesn’t appear to bear her more ill will, but drifts off before giving it further thought.

Waking a little before sunset, she indulges in a walk free of assassination attempts and wonders what her father would make of her progress; as much as she’d like to deny it, she knows she’s improved.

Worse yet, she could concede to enjoying at least some of her time away from the Capitol, though it was a little boring at times and a lot of infuriating at others.

Emily eventually finds herself lurking around the kitchen door with an empty stomach, and while Daud might have taken this as a chance to catch her out on another occasion, tonight he just seasons his meal and pays her no mind. He doesn't move in any way that indicates an injury, but it was one of his earliest lessons so she knows better than to think it isn’t bothering him.

She could leave well alone until he leaves, which is what she’s done most other nights, but this time is hungry and curious enough to spy.

“Are you going to stand there all night like a stray?” he announces with his back to her.

“I was waiting,” she responds, hanging half way around the doorframe.

“For what?” he knocks back, and without an excuse she’d willingly admit she resolves to skulk over and silently portion out the last of the rabbit, bulked up with beans and whatever else is ripe.

She serves herself and sits to eat in profound awkwardness across the table from him, not knowing how or if they can have a conversation that doesn’t begin as a fight.

“I’d like to ask you a question,” he bears from the silence, startling her out of her own head as she drags her eyes from her bowl to his.

“Go ahead,” she says cautiously, trying to imagine what he could want to ask her. She doesn't even have answers to her own questions; like how she can bear to eat at the same table as the man who murdered her mother.
“How did you find me?” he asks.

“Oh. Father gave me a map,” she answers to her meal.

“Hm,” he growls, “Should’ve guessed.”

“Well it only got me to the hills,” she remarks, "I had to find my own way after that.” The notion seems to amuse him.

“There’s a lot of hills around here.”

“I know,” she bemoans. “I found out in excruciating detail as I traveled village to village, asking about occupied houses in the middle of nowhere.” This earns her a chuckle, though at the time she’d found it far from amusing.

"How did you find the people out here?” he inquires like he could actually be interested.

"Suspicious of strangers wearing scarfs over their face,” she returns on an under-exercised wit. Thankfully most of the places she went were so isolated that no one ever suspected the scruffy traveller asking odd questions could be their Empress, and it’d been an unconventional way to meet some of her lesser-known populace. “The children think you’re a ghost, by the way.”

“Good,” he says. “If people started coming here I’d have to move.”

“Why?” she asks. “Is isolation really so important?”

“Isolation?” he lulls. “Not to me.”

“Then what?” She resumes eating – something he has been doing the entire time and is commonly known as a conversation over dinner. It’s an odd fit, but admittedly more comfortable than sitting in barbed silence.

“Peace and quiet.”

"That's all?” she says without meaning to trivialise it like it sounds she does.

"That's enough," he replies surely.

A few days or weeks of calm is usually plenty for her – not ten years. Then again, if she’d led the kind of life he had, maybe a hundred years wouldn’t be enough.

“I… also have a question,” she says after the next lapse of silence tips in favour of awkwardness, when even setting her spoon in her bowl seems too loud. “Something I’ve wanted to ask since I got here.”

“Oh,” he replies carefully, and then when she pauses too long invites, “And?”

“What did the note from my father say?” She shoves the words off her tongue like hatchlings from the nest.

“You don’t know?” He seems perplexed.

“It was sealed and addressed to you,” she points out. “Empress or not, my neck would be wrung if I went around opening his correspondence.” Daud gives a snort of amusement, like a laugh that doesn’t quite get going.
“I can imagine.” His smile looks like it doesn’t know how to be worn on such a long face. “What do you think it said?” he poses in a way that’s unmistakably conversational.

“At first I thought it must be a threat,” she answers. “You know, do this for me or I’ll hunt you down and gut you like a… anyway, now I don’t think that’d work.”

“It wouldn’t,” he concurs, pushing a piece of meat around his bowl like he isn’t sure what to do with it.

“You obviously owe him a debt for your life, but that isn’t something he’d need to write down,” she reasons. "In fact, knowing that you still refused until you’d read it, just like he predicted.” She rests her chin on her hand and muses, “So I can’t figure it out.”

“You might not like the answer;” he warns.

“I deal with many things that I don’t like,” she replies with a pointed look: she was here, for one. “Besides, I answered your question.”

“Very well,” he says gravely, and goes quiet for so long she’s about to prompt him when he recites, “Don’t let her die like her mother.”

He – and everything else, it feels – stops for a moment. Just when things almost become normal, she has to confront the fact that this man put a sword through her mother’s gut for a fistful of gold, and for his crimes he lives this tranquil life while she’s cold in the ground.

“So a request not to murder me?” she says to her empty bowl.

“I was an assassin,” he replies like he’s dusting off an excuse from the archive. “If it wasn’t me, it would’ve been someone else.”

“But it was you,” she argues, throwing a glare across the table. “Another assassin might have failed.”

“Then another would have come,” he says, holding the look without doubt, “and then another. And as many more as it took until it fell to me.”

“So it was inevitable that you murdered my mother,” she says like lancing a boil.

“It was a job,” is the only explanation he can give.

“You could’ve refused.” And then maybe Jessamine Kaldwin would still rule the Isles, and she wouldn’t have to guess and struggle and learn the hard way all the time.

“The moment an assassin starts choosing work based on the target, they become political,” he says firmly. “Assassins with politics are no better than soldiers.” He pauses, like he’s counting something in his head. “That’s your fifth lesson.”

“To hell with your lessons,” she spits. “So you didn’t care at all?”

“I cared,” he tells her, “but it didn’t change anything.”

“You clearly had no trouble with the task.” She holds her voice together, but it is close to shaking, “From what I remember, you were remarkably efficient.”

“I had work to do,” he answers in the shortest way possible. “I was good at it.”
“So everyone keeps saying,” she snaps.

“I assume that’s why Corvo sent you to me,” he continues, getting to his feet – still cautious around a newly repaired wound – to take his bowl and hers to the counter.

“Yes, because you’re the best,” she quotes dismissively.

“It’s more than that,” he says with a stillness that rolls across the room, pushing back against the turbulence that flows out of her. “What is done cannot be undone, and all the regret in the world won’t make a damn bit of difference to the fact that she’s gone.” He turns over his shoulder to catch her eye across the room, and she feels the heat in her face as blood pounds through her. “But to be sure that no one – not even me – could end you the way I ended her, well…” He takes a breath as measured as the swing of a pendulum. “I owe you that much.”

She can’t decide if she wants to kill him or burst into tears or both.

“I… suppose so,” she sighs, finally seeing the method in her father’s madness. As did Daud, apparently.

“She was different,” he says like he knows it doesn’t matter, “and I am sorry, but that doesn’t help you.”

“What is what you want?” she presses. “To help me?”

“Of course.” He plays it sincere, like he can have any reason to speak to her like this, and she shouldn’t have killed him when she had the chance.

“You have a funny way of showing it,” she retorts.

“Do I?” he replies guilelessly. “I thought I’d been remarkably patient.”

“You’ve been away from people too long,” she fires. “Have you forgotten how to be human?” The question comes more from the part of her that is angry and vengeful towards him; that’s glad she hurt him and would do it any time she had the chance.

However, as he walks towards the hallway, presumably to retire for the night, the look he sends her is unbearably honest.

“Yes,” he admits, “but I’m learning.”
The Sixth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Daud gets as cutthroat as this Serkonian summer.

Emily wakes earlier each day as it becomes too hot to sleep in her heat-trap room any longer, and this morning finds Daud nursing a coffee at the kitchen table; understandable, given he was only stabbed yesterday.

While his being out of place could and has driven her to violence before, on this occasion she crosses the room in peace to fix herself a cup.

“How-” she starts and immediately stops, hesitating lest she sound too much like she cares, “is your injury?”

It takes him a moment to respond, but when he does it’s brief. “Itchy.”

“That’s a good sign,” she replies, quietly relieved that he’s not more irritable.

“Easy to say when it’s not you,” he counters with a little more edge, rubbing idly around his stitches in a way she knows barely helps. Like it or not, his stitches and wound both were a product of her hands, and she’s a niggling feeling somewhere between guilt and resentment that she tries to subdue.

“I… is there anything I can do?” she offers without being sure what she wants him to say. The balance between guilt and satisfaction tips back and forth so often she’s given up keeping track.

He lets out a thoughtful murmur over his coffee, swilling it around a dented mug like he has all the time in the world.

“Since you’re offering,” he mulls, “there’s some work in the garden you could help with.”

“Work?” she echoes. “Like what?”

“The harvest doesn’t bring itself to your plate, highness,” he gibes, and there’s something that’s not quite teasing in his tone.

“In light of the circumstances, I can make a concession,” she rattles off in a way her slimiest advisors would be proud of. Her Imperial tone seems to amuse him, as he gives a rusty chuckle which turns into a hiss, hand twitching instinctively for his side.

“Follow me,” he invites, and before she knows it he’s put her to work for hours – weeding, digging and even pulling up potatoes, until she’s pickled in sweat and plastered with several kinds of dirt.

The temperature builds slowly but surely, until she can bear it no longer and gives up up half-way to the water pump, falling flat on her back in the shade and refusing to get back up.

She closes her eyes and tunes into the environment, picking out Daud’s footsteps as he approaches her from the direction of the house. The distinctive shuck-shuck of his leather sandals flapping until
suddenly they do not.

She feigns sleep until the last moment, opening her eyes and moving just fast enough to catch the handle of his stick – which might just be the end of a broom – as it stops in front of her face.

“Quick enough,” she muffles through the back of her hand.

“Maybe,” he grunts, spinning the pole around his hand and propping it back on the ground. She doesn’t get up and receives a questioning look for her trouble. “Finished already?” he remarks, with a twist in the corner of his mouth that might be amusement.

“Isn’t there a place to escape this wretched heat?” she asks with limbs scattered.

“There’s a lake in the hills,” he answers.

“There is?” She shoots up and almost asks why he hasn’t said anything about it before now, then remembers the opportunities for such exchange of information are far and few between them. “Where?”

“I’d have to show you,” he says almost like a warning, “and the walk isn’t easy.”

“And this is?” she counters, peeling herself off the ground. “I’ll be fine.” If he was proposing to manage any trip with a fresh injury, she could handle it in near-perfect health.

“We’d be wise to wait a couple of hours,” he advises.

“The sooner we start, the sooner we’ll get there,” she reasons, to say nothing of increasing the time she might be able to spend in real water.

“It’ll be hot,” he warns.

“Will be?” she scathes. “How much worse can it get?”

“Fine,” he grunts. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

It’s about twenty minutes slog uphill before Emily accepts the scale of her misjudgement, and even though Daud is wounded she barely keeps pace with him up a rugged, zig-zagging trail in baking midday heat.

“There’s a saying,” he remarks what she hopes is the right side of half-way, strolling with just his stick and skin of water under the shade of his beaten-up straw hat. He does at least show signs of the heat, with sweat running along the scars that carve his brow, and breath far heavier than the usual controlled whisper.

“Wuh?” she fails to articulate, though after a morning of digging around in the ground followed by what feels like a trek across the face of the sun she feels far from eloquent.

“Two kinds of creature go out in the midday sun,” he continues, plodding onwards. “Mad dogs and Gristolmen.” In spite of her exhaustion, she manages a laugh, stopping to take a breather and examine the view instead of staring intensely at the ground ahead of her.

The mountains surround them around a deep valley, untouched by people in a way that’d be impossible anywhere near Dunwall. A vast landscape as far as the eye can see, offering a
blanketing silence through which the problems of society seem irrelevant.

He mostly walks ahead of her, leading the way and – as she finds out – if she gets more than three paces in front of him the stick that doubles as a hiking support gets thrown under her feet. She recovers most times, but eventually gives up and walks haggardly behind him to conserve energy.

Just when she’s convinced he’s leading her into the wilderness to die, set to accuse him that this was somehow his final assignment and how her father will avenge her, over a ridge a lake appears in the middle of a wide crater that she hopes is the product of long-dormant volcanic activity.

Renewed by the sight of a body of water in far too long, she rushes past Daud and doesn’t stop for any longer than it takes to kick off her boots before charging in. The water is warm in the shallows but cools as she wades farther, diving at the first opportunity.

It’s been some time since she had the luxury of this much water, swimming as fast as she can until her arms ache, she comes to float somewhere near the centre of the lake.

There’s a breeze strong enough to sweep ripples across the surface, and she drifts towards the shallows feeling the heat leech from her blood. She swims lazily for the shore, scrubbing the dirt from body as best she can, and if not for her company might have stripped off entirely – she hasn’t felt clean since she left Dunwall.

Casting an eye along the shoreline, she spots Daud tucked against a boulder with his hat tipped forward. On further consideration, he might even be asleep, boots cast aside and chin right down to his chest.

Curious as to whether he could actually be off his guard, she wades out as quietly as she can, wet clothes pasted to her skin and an ear tuned to the rhythm of his breath. If he knows she’s there he isn’t showing it, and as she gets nearer becomes convinced he’s actually asleep – not least when he lets out a nasal snore. She bites her lip and reaches for the dagger still strapped to her hip.

See how he likes it, she thinks as she creeps a blade ever-closer to the exposed stretch of skin on his neck. However, when she’s almost close enough to claim victory the next thing she’s aware of is a hand wrapped firmly around her wrist.

No other movement betrays a sign of consciousness, but he pulls her with the power of a freight train, harder and faster than she can hope to keep up with, and flings her to the ground next to him. The shock of landing flat on her back is quickly overshadowed by the weight of him on top of her, and she catches up with what has happened when she feels the edge of her dagger – pried easily out of her hand – laid less than carefully against her throat.

The edge of the blade is electric. Where the metal isn’t cold, Daud is, becoming every bit as terrifying as she remembers. He presses down as if he’s going to snuff her out like a candle while she struggles for breath.

“Daud,” she manages barely more than a whisper, but it has to be enough because with the blade sharp against her windpipe there isn’t much else she can do.

There is a terrifying moment of not knowing what comes next, but as fast as it happened he’s suddenly three feet away from her. The dagger sits abandoned over her neck, falling as she gasps and bolts up like she’s hauling herself out of the grave. It’s only as her heart slows that she realises this might’ve been the first time she’s said his name.

He sits with a hand over his eyes, a frown just visible on the lower half of his face, which he rubs
like he’s just waking up.

"Sorry," he murmurs groggily, reaching for his hat and shoving it on. Empty fingers worry at his brow, eyes out over the lake and quite definitely not on her. “I wouldn’t recommend doing that again.”

“Did you think I was someone else?” she asks, watching the tiny waves cast by wind onto the shore of the lake, broken up by clumps of seasonal plants.

"What?" He’s scratching the back of his head like a fidget who can’t sit still inside his own skin.

"The way you reacted was… different," she remarks politically. It was like he really wanted to kill her, she meant.

"Ah," he says with a rougher edge than usual. "Old habits." He’s definitely making a point of not looking at her, she thinks, and rubs her eyes against the sun which still beams torturously down on them. She wonders how long a person could live on a tightrope like that.

“So that’s how I should be?” she says.

“Hm?” he grunts, still not quite there.

“I should react like you do,” she rephrases.

"If you want to live," he answers plainly.

She pulls a face. “How morbid.”

“To cheat death you have to be so close you can look the bastard in the teeth,” he mutters. “If it’s abstract it won’t be enough to keep you sharp.”

“Abstract?” she queries, and he looks at her for a tense moment.

“The difference between telling someone to walk and putting a gun to their head first,” he goes on. “When the danger’s so close you can feel metal against your skin.”

“And if I can’t have someone follow me around with a gun at my head?” she snipes, picking off pieces of debris from her wet clothing where she’s been rolled in the dirt.

“It’s a state of mind,” he continues oblivious to her attempts to derail the lecture, “Knowing you could die any moment.” She thinks she knows what he means, still fighting the urge to burst into overwhelmed tears or maybe throw a punch – possibly both – after the way he scared her.

“You have to agree that is morbid by definition,” she argues.

“It’s the opposite,” he counters. “You have to think about how you’re going to survive, at any cost.”

She knows the price he has in mind, and there is an unbearable closeness in talking matters of life and death with him.

“Let me guess, that’s my sixth lesson?” she mocks, tactically putting some space between them by standing up.

“Why not,” he answers like he isn’t really there.
She returns to the water for another swim, hoping to clear her head.

From the water she watches Daud get up not long after she leaves, walking around the waterline picking at the clumps of seasonal plants that have sprung up where the lake has receded. Though he’s a little stiff to the trained eye, his response to her ill-conceived strike betrayed nothing of his injury.

She chases away the jitters he left her with, diving to the shallow lake floor and looking up at the filtered light of the surface. Water has always been comforting to her, and she files the sensation away with careful purpose. The feeling of not knowing – even just for a moment – if she’s going to live or die.

She only comes out of the water when her fingers start to wrinkle, plodding with her boots swinging from one hand and puddles forming in her footsteps. Daud leans against an outcrop of rocks, chewing the end of a long stalk with the brim of his hat tilted down – but she knows when she’s being watched.

“Ready?” he says when she’s close, and though his gaze chased her all the way out of the water, all he seems concerned with now is the ground below her.

“As I’ll ever be,” she replies, steeling herself for the hike back – the temperature has abated at least, but they’ll need to make good time to get back before the light fades.

She can believe the man who pushed a knife against her throat was the assassin her father had sent her to train with, but finds him hard to reconcile with the man she sees the rest of the time. Staring at the back of his shoulders as they undertake the walk home, his house appearing as a tiny yellow dot in the distance, she wonders if he can either.
Chapter Summary

In as many days Emily has stabbed Daud and he almost cut her throat, so a respite from knife-play seems mutually beneficial.

“Let’s give the knives a rest,” Daud remarks the morning after they return from the lake, and for once Emily’s not inclined to argue. He’s still wearing her stitches, and a scare like the one he gave her was enough to make her thankful he’ll have empty hands for a while.

Even unarmed, she doesn’t make it through breakfast before he’s stepped out of her blind spot and put the ball of his hand square over her spine.

“A wristbow and it’d be over,” he says idly, playing exactly the same game with less dangerous props. She quickly discovers the extent to which her neck – usually protected behind collars and scarves – is unused to being touched, lighting up whenever he makes contact and scattering her impulses to the four winds.

Refusing to shiver, she swats him away and continues spreading fruit conserve on still-warm bread. She knows he bakes it every few days, but hasn’t ever been there earlier than when he takes a loaf out of the oven; it’s better than gives her satisfaction to admit.

“Let me eat something first,” she berates, and could swear he even tuts as he reaches around her for a pot of sugar – for his coffee, which hisses from its pot on the stove by her elbow.

“An assassin won’t,” he reminds her, but she’s sick to death of hearing about all the ways she could have died to an assassin.

“You will,” she says forcefully, not quite an order, but for once she’d like to have her breakfast in peace.

“Oh?” he murmurs, stirring sugar into his cup – dented, by her sword. “And why is that?”

“Because… I say so,” she says, falling onto the part of her defence that has no place here; her authority.

She knows the assassin in him, who scared her half to death only yesterday, wouldn’t let this go, and even the belligerent teacher would test her mettle just to make a point. Except he just gives a quiet chuckle and sips his coffee, seeming to ruminate over that more than her.

“Very well, highness” he concludes with only a hint of sarcasm and heads outside, leaving her to read too much into his actions.

Though she puts up a dedicated fight, for every time Emily manages to avoid Daud’s calloused fingertips closing around her neck he succeeds in equal portion, and if anything seems to find it easier getting through her guard without weapons slowing him down. Perhaps using them non-
lethally had been the trouble.

She gets fed up of finding him constantly in her blind spot, always with a smug word and hands that are too hot and fingers that only need to dance over her pulse to remind her that if this weren’t a game she would be dead.

She wonders how she could have survived this long if she’s really so vulnerable, but remembers that if Corvo were here things would be very different. Every defeat at Daud’s hands reminds how much she’s relied on her father; forgivable when she was a child, but a risk as she grows older. After all, he can’t live forever.

She learns to anticipate strikes better, but also pays more attention to her environment, responding to it in greater measure as something that can work for as well as against her. One time he comes for her near to one of the unused buildings on the far side of his land, faded whitewash over crumbling yellow stone that cuts off her means of escape.

Without enough space to get away, instead she gets closer, turning into him in a way she hasn’t before – knowing that he’s ultimately unarmed, and better yet, wounded. His hand, which would’ve clasped the back of her neck had she moved a second later, rests fragiley over her throat, the side of his knuckle brushing the underside of her chin.

She draws a breath that she has to deliberately keep steady, and looks up at him with her hands – swept along in the twist that has put them face-to-face – resting against the linen of his shirt.

It’s the closest they’ve been while she can still see him, and she’s struck by the extent of the scar that snarls around his eye on its brutal path down his face. She wonders what cut such a savage wound, but before she thinks to ask he’s nothing but smoke. He reappears several feet away, eyeing her defensively.

"What was that?" he demands like she has something to answer for.

"What?" she challenged. “I’m changing my approach.” She crosses her arms defiantly. “I grow tired of you being behind me all the time."

He eyes her in a way that makes her hair stand on end, and raises a hand to blink again, appearing – as always – right behind her.

“Get used to it,” he mutters too close to her neck for her to get away, but she manages to lift an elbow high enough to press into his stitches should he try to get any closer to her.

"Try that again and you'll regret it," she threatens with anger poised to ignite – sick and furious at the hand that rests at her collar. His fingers lift and he steps away.

"Is there a problem here?" he asks more gently than she’s prepared to give him credit for.

"I'm fed up of you grabbing at me," she complains, rubbing her neck like she's buffing out his fingerprints. "I liked it better when I still had weapons."

"I didn't," he quips, and she recalls the fear of having him press a knife to her throat too brightly in her memory to tempt fate.

"Isn't there something else you can do?" she questions. "Leave the knives by all means, but less... hands." She's tired of abusing the air he's left behind, so it is mildly cathartic to spit venom at him for once.
He makes a sound of consideration, more expressive in the tones that he uses than the words he chooses when he says, “I may have a solution.”

"You do?" she remarks, slightly surprised he’s being cooperative, and waits for an explanation that doesn't come. “And?"

"That’d be telling," he could almost be said to tease before walking away.

Emily is on the terrace when she discovers what this new means is, stepping out in the early evening with the realisation that Daud is absent from his usual post by the fire.

With no signs of him elsewhere, it can only mean trouble, but she carries boldly on and waits for him to strike from her blind spot – his seemingly natural resting place. Without more than a soft rush of air and movement too fast to track, she feels a thin cord pull back over her neck.

No more hands, of course, her bolt of recognition tells her as she gasps and reaches behind her head to grab his wrists, knowing that it would just as likely be wire if this were real.

Already made up to fight, she pushes her weight against him and plants two feet one after the other on the wall nearby, pushing backwards and pulling up her knees up to turn a full somersault over his head, landing behind Daud with his wrists still in her hands.

Changing her grip, she releases one of his hand and puts the other into a lock she’s not had a chance to use until now, seizing his joints together so efficiently it lets her guide him against the wall as easily as leading a lamb.

Daud looses hoarse sounds that could be suppressed pain as he struggles, and the power it gives her only makes her more inclined to hold him where he is until he actually admits defeat.

“Enough,” he bites.

"What was that?" she invites over-formally, adjusting the bind in a way she knows will send pain shooting up his arm.

"Mercy," he pleads with disarming sincerity, and she releases him somewhere between satisfied and wondering if that was how he sounded in front of her father the night his life was spared. The reason he could stand before her now rubbing his joints pensively before asking, "Who taught you that?" like they were familiar enough for question and answer sessions.

"A teacher," she answers obliquely.

"I gathered," he returns on quicker wits, and insidiously keeps going, “From Dunwall?"

"A Tyvian," she continues, so determined to be obstinate that he gets the message.

“Have it your way,” he remarks without real resentment and makes like he’s going to leave her be, getting several steps before he adds, “He must be good,” like an afterthought. Of course he could spare compliments for strangers.

"She is," Emily corrects.

"Apologies," he says so easily she could have been mistaken for thinking it was something else. "Did she teach you more like that?"
"Plenty," she informs aloofly, but giving into the opportunity to lord something over him continues. "I might not compare in physical strength to some, but that isn't everything."

"Naturally," he retorts – he's a little broad in the shoulders, and with Gristol-weight layers on him might look heavier, but even she knows his profession puts cleverness before force. Unexpectedly, the next thing he says is, "Will you show me another?"

"Pardon?" she delivers automatically, swearing it must be the heat whispering in her ear.

"The move, I want to see it again," he explains at more length, then with a birdlike tilt of his head. "You seem surprised."

"Well," she muses, "you want me to teach you?"

"Show me," he corrects, and she knew it was too good to be true.

"Very well," she concedes, content to revel in any moment of superiority. "I'll need your hand." He offers her his palm cautiously, and watches as she wraps her left hand under his right and digs her fingertips into the meat of his thumb, then pushes with trained precision with her other hand to lock his wrist.

His arm twists out of mechanical necessity, so when she pushes lightly down he bends at the knees and drops hissing like an alley cat at her feet. The feeling of incapacitating him is so gratifying she does it a few more times before letting him go, pushing until she can hear him suck air through his teeth – but doesn't ask her to let him go, seeing it out until the end.

"Impressive," he remarks like he's actually bestowing a straight compliment, but then quickly follows up with, "Why aren't you using it?" She rolls her eyes and he notices, going by the skepticism that flashes across his face.

"It's for unarmed hand to hand," she explains.

"That's an excuse," he says like shooting a bird out of the sky.

"Close quarters combat is dangerous," she admits spontaneously. She much prefers a length of steel between her and anyone trying to get at her.

"You're dangerous," he replies in a way that makes her stomach flip, then in his rough-cut slur finishes, "especially up close."

For lack of any other reaction, she just stares at him.

"Anyway..." he mutters, rubbing his wrist and turning away. "If you're afraid of proximity it'll be exploited."

"I'm not afraid," she argues. "I'd just rather have a sword in my hand."

"Then they will wait until you don't," he counters fiercely. "You can't have preference, if you reach for a weapon when you should've gone bare-handed you're giving someone every opportunity to end you. Fight with what you've got – that's the..." he runs off into thin air, flailing until she realises what he is reaching for.

"Seventh?" she supplies.

His smile is equal parts re- and un-rewarding.
"That’s your seventh lesson.”
The Eighth Lesson

Chapter Summary

In which Daud cannot practice what he preaches.

Chapter Notes

Big smooshes to readers still crewing this trash ship with me. We're all garbage together <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emily Kaldwin, first of her name and Empress of the Kingsparrow Isles, was many things – but a morning person was not among them. The assassin Daud, known as The Knife of Dunwall – retired – appears to be the exact opposite.

When she would rather be drifting slowly toward wakefulness, accustomed to staff who were fast learners and gifted at treading softly until she was ready to start the day, he seems intent on testing every reflex she has.

Midway through the second week under what she’d only loosely call tutelage, Emily steps out each morning ready for a fight and realises it must be exactly what he wants.

It’s already dizzyingly hot upstairs, and though the kitchen is one of the cooler rooms in the house it’s not much in the way of relief. Most of the clothes she brought with her are ill-suited for this climate, so she’s taken to cycling the same few things, washing them every other day to dry on the roof under the ruthless sun.

Daud isn’t there when she enters – which bodes ill, if anything – so with a sigh she starts about fixing her breakfast, sawing off slices of fresh bread with a kitchen knife and wondering if she’ll have time for coffee before he strikes.

She should be so lucky.

He comes at her from behind, of course, but she’s ready and tilts her head to one side, skimming past his hand and raising her own in retaliation. Except his fingers close around her wrist and cut her movement short, the serrated edge of the knife catching a bolt of sunlight from the open window.

“You know the rules,” he says into her ear, some way that’s not quite scolding or teasing but hints at both, and she drops it with a clatter to the counter.

Until his wound has healed they’re still operating under a ban on blades; something he’s not hesitant to remind her of, but she doesn’t mind as much as she’d expect. Perhaps because of the implication that he’s more wary of her armed.
In line with the rules of this subtle game, he lets go of her wrist after she releases the knife. Wasting no time, she grabs his hand with both of hers and swiftly turns it over, pulling on an arm that feels like it’s made of steel cables in an attempt to lock it. Still working with his hands and body for a living, he’s every bit lean and fast in a fight, and learns quickly – already working out how to avoid the binds she’d been using to much success over the past few days, he drops at the knees before she can apply any leverage.

Except she’s not so willing to release him, and keeps his arm tangled tightly between hers as he tries to yank it back. Digging an elbow into his ribs, she anchors against him as he tries again to pull away and she continues to deny him – she knows where he is like this, a sure advantage over the alternative. When his free hand comes in from the other side she intercepts and slams it to the counter like shooting clay pigeons.

Being held captive seems to unnerve him, the jostling becoming more frantic until finally he whips his hand off the counter and puts it square on her back, pushing himself away with greater strength to the accompaniment of a distinct tearing sound.

She looks down to see one of the front seams of her shirt has been pulled apart and hesitates – contemplating what she’s supposed to wear now – before catching up with herself. She expects to pay for her distraction only to find Daud similarly stunned, looking over her shoulder like he’s never torn a shirt before.

The moment of opportunity is fleeting but she snatches it, releasing his arm and eliciting only minor additional ripping as she pulls herself into a place she can fight from. Yet by the time she’s turned he’s not there, blinking so far across the room he knocks his head on the back wall as he reappears.

“Ouch, sorry,” he delivers out different sides of his mouth at the same time, raising a hand that doesn’t seem to know whether it’s supposed to be reaching for his eyes or the bump on his head, “I didn’t…” He looks at her, but not for long before he casts away again. “Sorry,” he utters once more, and before she can query what he’s so apologetic about he blinks out of sight.

She looks around, expecting him to spring out of a corner ready to deliver the final blow, but he truly appears to be gone. With a bemused shrug she returns to her breakfast, picking at the flapping ends of her shirt to inspect the damage. After so much sun, sweat and sparring the delicate tailoring simply gave up, parting up the entire length of the seam and stopping just under her bust.

With her other wearable shirt drying on the roof, rather than change she simply unbuttons the bottom of the ripped one and knots the loose ends together. The alteration leaves it little above her naval, which could be argued to suit the weather better anyway.

As she reaches for the coffee pot and feels a breath of air over her skin, the thought occurs that the torn shirt could have something to do with Daud’s incoherence. Settling into her waking mind, she becomes more firmly convinced of the fact that while she’d been distracted by the loss of 1/5th of her wardrobe, so had he.

She finishes her breakfast and sets out still musing over the morning’s events, and whether the reason behind Daud’s reaction could be what she thinks it is. If it is – the more horrifying and outrageous implications set aside for lack of any idea to handle them – it’d give her something utterly crippling to have on him.

For that reason alone, she intends to find out.
Putting theory into practice, the next time Daud comes for Emily she continues going into him instead of out, even when they aren’t hemmed in by walls.

His hand swoops into her peripheral vision and rather than knocking it away, she slides her fingers between his and locks them in place, turning to face him and getting a rare look up close. He winces with his crows’ feet against the sun that lights up the silver in his hair, and counters without missing a beat, reaching for her with his other hand – only to meet skin-on-skin when he would’ve otherwise touched the shirt he ripped past providing such coverage.

He withdraws his hand like she’s a lit stove, so fast the sensation of rough fingers on her waist tickles more than anything, and she puts her own palm to the spot as he shakes off her hold and moves back like she’s the assassin between them. For as calm as he holds his ever-present poker face, the tension is apparent.

“Problem?” she asks with just a hint of an impression.

He looks at her like he wants to take her head off and rattle it, but instead lets out a controlled breath.

“No,” he answers stonily, then is gone before she can offer any kind of reply. There’s an air of wariness about him today, something that makes her feel less like the hunted than usual.

The next time his hands dive for her like a hawk, she ups the ante and turns at just the right moment to link her hands around his neck in return. Even as the butt of his palm presses against her jugular with anatomical accuracy, she has already taken two counts of his pulse throbbing though his body in the soft recesses of his throat – he’s made of the same flesh and blood as them all. And if they’d both been armed, she might just have beaten him to it.

He blinks away and stubs his toe on a rock as he reappears, hissing like an alleycat before he vanishes for good. She can’t help noticing he’s skittish – like he can’t get away from her fast enough.

The cat and mouse game continues to change when she starts tracking him. It’s a passive hunt, keeping tabs as he stalks her and not making a move until he does. She’s slowly learning the tells that place him, from the movement of animals to shadows under the trees.

It could the heat, her imagination, or an intoxicating combination of both, but Emily swears that she is wearing him down; he flits around her like a moth round a lampshade, trying to get close only to be knocked back when she meets him with open arms. Trying to get near enough to ‘kill’ her without letting her into the comfort zone he is making abundantly clear.

After a full day of escalating attempts to get close to her on his terms and failing, she lures him into the house and turns on him without warning, planting two hands on the wall either side of his head. What’s more astonishing is that he lets her, looking back from the whitewashed brickwork without running.

“What are you doing?” he lets slip, having been silent most of the day. It’s so clear something is wrong he could’ve written it between the lines of his forehead, and she concludes he may have been willingly caught.

“Is it all intimate contact you’re scared of, or just me?” she announces, shocking even herself with her candidy. It’s usually her father’s role to cut straight to the uncomfortable truth, but learning to
do these things for herself is the whole reason she’s here. Although she can hear her heart thumping in her ears, she swears she sees his pulse racing in his neck, and knows she’s taking them off the map.

Good, she thinks, we can be equally lost.

“You’re playing a dangerous game,” he says like lighting signal fires.

“But I’m right – aren’t I?” she counters, certain she’d proven the theory.

Although she has him caged in her arms, he steps forward so surely that she’s convinced he will barge right into her if she doesn’t yield, and when she gives way he scoffs like he’s proven a point.

“Don’t push someone when you don’t know what they’re capable of,” he says in a tone that could be scraped out of the bottom of an ashtray. He starts walking away, but as he once invited she chases him, catching up to the junction where the staircase meets the hall just before he disappears into his room.

“Is that supposed to be another of your lessons?” she hurls like a throwing knife at his back. “Some master you are, teaching what you don’t practice!”

He stops and turns just far enough over his shoulder to face her in profile.

“Such as?” he asks, and there is something viscerally satisfying about knowing she’s under his skin.

“You said I should use everything at my disposal,” she recites, and in a snap of the void he’s in front of her.

She backpedals up the stairs only to find him falling upon her like a flood. The passage is barely wide enough for two people to pass as it is, and he edges her back against the wall separated by a thin breaker of air.

“Then what do you think happens at the end of this?” he delivers in a way her senses tell her is intended to be threatening, but her gut just tells her to roar back.

“That’s what I’m trying to find out,” she answers defiantly. He moves suddenly, and although she keeps her eyes open she flinches, resenting the betrayal of her body against her mind’s order, but all he does is take her chin in his thumb and forefinger and lift her face up.

The one thing she won’t show him is fear. That’s what he saw of her mother in her last moments, and he doesn’t deserve the satisfaction; even if it feels like her insides are pouring into a vortex in the pit of her stomach.

“Don’t load a weapon if you’re not going to pull the trigger,” he tells her in his gravelly lilt, and his grip on her is so light it couldn’t be claimed to hold her in place with anything except willpower. That she allows it is the more worrying part, remaining still even as he tells her, “That’s your eighth lesson.”

He steps away like class has been dismissed, thumping down the hallway to put a thick wooden door between them.

She wonders if he’s foolish enough to think that’ll be enough.
Chapter End Notes

To anyone who thinks Emily's letting this go... have faith, and see you on the next update ;)

The Ninth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily Kaldwin cannot sleep in much the same way as Daud cannot be allowed to think he's beaten her.

Chapter Notes

Today marks the second time I've found someone on tumblr tagging their disgust/disapproval of this pairing, so obviously I'm updating out of spite and to drag us all further down into the filth.

While I'm more confused than hurt by such incidents, making snap judgments about a story based on the pairing alone and tagging that hate online is pretty basic bullshit. I wasn't searching for it (just looking for pictures of my trash children), and I've never promoted this story on tumblr, nor is anyone being asked to read or like the pairing, so I didn't expect it to become a point of such loathing for some people simply by... existing?

I'd like to think anyone who gives this story a chance would see that it's not trying to be a problematic pairing that makes excuses for or ignores all the extremely legitimate reasons that these two shouldn't ever work together (believe me, I know them), but instead takes them as a starting point to build into something that I hope is believable (and enjoyable). Grey morality and redemption arcs are sort of Dishonored's bread and butter so I really didn't anticipate that kind of reaction, but at the end of the day it's the people actually reading who this is for.

Anyway, rant over and I'm giving special shoutout to the faithful crew of this ship. I read all your comments and don't always reply because I suck, but much love to Lazywhaler, anonymous+spoon and RosaEldi for letting me know there are other people who want to go on this downward spiral into fandom hell (literally?) with me - it honestly makes all the difference, so I hope you like the chapter.

Emily’s father has subjected her to many a lecture on the ill-effects of sleeping on unfinished business – a piece delivered somehow without irony, given the number of half-written reports he has been found snoring soundly on top of. Although she’s far more lenient than Corvo with regards to letting things lie, it is not so much unfinished business with Daud that keeps her restless – turning their conversation over in her head like so many stones – but the godawful notion that he could think he’s won.

She thrashes in nightclothes that seem determined to smother her, wrapping around every joint until she’s a hot coil that can’t be turned off. His double-talk of loading weapons and triggers rolls in and out of her ears like it’s been mounted on rails; they’ve danced so elegantly around the issue, but she’s no so naïve to be ignorant of the subtext.
After all – she started it.

Under most circumstances – under any reasonable ones – she wouldn’t and shouldn’t be in this position; caught up in a game of intimacy cat and mouse with him. It ought to be the last thing she wants, yet she played the hand and knows there’s no picking the cards back up.

When she can’t bear to be inside the airless snuff box that is her room a moment longer, she climbs out on the roof to stare at a half-empty moon and wonder if it was wise to pit herself in this way against the man who murdered her mother.

She could accept that he’d called her bluff and fold with what dignity she has left, but the Serkonian half of her blood runs too hot to take even a single step back. Because she’s not just a Kaldwin but an Attano too, and she knows how her father plays games of confidence: always double down and never fold. It’d been one of his firmest lessons to her; teach someone they can bend you once and they’ll expect it time and again.

Daud is the last person she wants to give so much as an inch of ground to.

Staring at the starry night sky – breath-taking if she pays attention to it, stars she never knew existed from the polluted skies of Dunwall – with her arms folded around her knees, she can’t settle the notion that if he is on the back foot and bluffing, the last thing she should do is make him think it works.

So the next thing Emily knows, she’s letting her pig-headed gut run herself downstairs and along the corridor to his room. She stares at the door like she can burn it down, and then with every inch of her mind and body dedicated to the act, starts to rap her hand on his door.

“Daud,” she calls out, knocking louder with the same death-march frequency. “Daud!”

She hears movements from inside the room, but far longer than anyone would need to answer. He’s waiting her out, but she knows she won’t sleep anyway and steams on.

“I’ll do this all night if I have to!” she yells through the stained wood, and then suddenly it opens and he steps out.

“What?” he growls, stripped to the waist with a countenance somewhere between disapproving and downright grumpy. His grogginess, the way he rubs his eye and ridged scar tissue down one side of his face, suggests he’s not shared her trouble sleeping. He probably thinks he won this round.

Quick as she can, she places her hands against coarse stubble on either side of his jaw, then lifts up on her toes to lean in until she can feel the heat of his breath as he exhales.

“What are you-” is exactly as far as he gets.

“Here’s your goddam trigger,” she says over his mouth, pushing him away as much as she holds him in place as she presses hers against it.

He’s still, but she feels his jaw tightening under her fingers and something in her gut tells her she was right, and this is his lesson.

All she’s wanted to do since she got here is beat him as many ways as she can, but when she moves back the havoc she’s expecting to see in his face – along with any other indicator of emotions that he’s learned to swallow so well – is absent.

“What’re you trying to prove?” he drawls like he’s half-awake.
“That I—... it doesn’t matter,” she trails off, and also finds it unconvincing.

She’s increasingly aware of his skin radiating heat against her, bare from the waist up, and her handiwork stands out as a bold new addition to the motley of scars that punctuate his skin, stitches holding fast and a crust of blood to attest to her capability. She’s already marked him permanently, begging the question of just what it is she’s after – or why it isn’t enough.

“Be sure of anything you do,” he says so low she feels the vibration of his chainsaw rasp in her hands.

“Let me guess,” she replies, holding onto him out of stubbornness more than anything. “Another of your-”

“No more lessons tonight,” he interrupts, and for lack of her doing anything about it, reaches up to lift her hands from him.

His touch is different to when he plays at killing her, and as he guides her by the wrist to lay her arms by her sides she’s struck with an impulse to do the foolish thing again – as many times as it takes to break him, but the moment passes so fast she’s only aware of it after it’s gone.

“Go to bed,” he delivers like a weary parent.

“I can’t,” she says, trying not to sound childish. “The heat.”

“Beyond my control.” he dismisses. “Goodnight.” Though they’re so close he can barely move without engaging her, but he still manages to slip back through his door without touching her, leaving only the imprint of the warmth pouring off him on her skin.

She skulks back to her airless room considering just what kind of crazy she must have inherited to think that was a thing to do. He’d set no precedent thus far of reacting in any of the ways she’d expect, so why she should expect him to start now puzzles even her on reflection.

It’s a long time coming, but when she finally sleeps she dreams of standing in her mother’s last moments, watching out over the familiar surroundings of what is now her mausoleum.

The nightmare is always familiar, but varies in so many ways that she couldn’t say which is the authentic memory anymore. In this version Daud blinks in front of her armed, staring in that same incomprehensible, infuriating way as his fingers close around her neck. A shock runs through her and she puts a hand to her stomach to feel it pierced with a familiar blade, palm coming back pouring blood like she’s taken all the skin off. Even in dreams Daud’s face is cast of stone, but undeterred she grabs him in bloodied fingers and puts her mouth on his, tasting darkness and anarchy as he turns to ash under her.

She jerks herself awake drenched in sweat and burning all over, reaching blindly for the bowl she has resorted to keeping at her bedside to wring lukewarm water from a rag over her chest, falling back asleep as she evaporates.

Emily sleeps so little the morning doesn’t feel real, stumbling out of her room before it bakes her in a haze of heat and fatigue. Fortunately Daud doesn’t trouble her – wary, as he should be – so she wanders the grounds alone, sleeping away most of the day in various patches of shade.

Awaking starving and with a mouth full of cotton, she trudges back to the house only to step
through a trip-wire rig that she’s sure wasn’t there before. It only flings a bundle of twigs at her, but she knows what it stands for and takes a wild guess at what he has been doing all day.

How one man could build so many traps in half a day astonishes her. She’s not seen Daud once, but has died a score of times and avoids just as many, climbing over bits of string and wire strung so methodically around the villa it’s like he’s working to a blueprint.

She hasn’t caught as much as a glimpse of him all day, but knows where he’ll be come sunset, and positions herself at the kitchen table in advance. He walks in right on time with a basket under his arm and pays her no notice, washing and skinning potatoes like she’s not even there.

She conceives of many things to say, but nothing that she’s poised enough to deliver with her uncertain, bitter tongue.

“Get some water to boil,” he remarks out of nowhere, “if you’re going to sit there doing nothing.”

She could refuse or argue but decides to play it through, only setting off one more tripwire on the way to the pump to fill a sturdy iron kettle, which she hangs over the fire.

“Traps are lazy,” she comments at last, staring into the flames that lick around the charcoal logs he burns.

“Then stop setting them off,” he replies easily, a potato in one hand and small knife in the other, digging out its eyes and slicing away the skin.

"Trying to keep me at a distance?" she suggests, more comfortable in antagonism than anywhere else. As long as he was against something, she could be for it – even this.

"If you're able to play around, you know what you're doing in close quarters," he explains like that's all there is to it.

"It’s no reason to neglect practice," she counters, skimming over his pointed choice of words.

"I'm not here to exercise you," he says, prying a chunk of wet flesh out of a potato like releasing a slingshot, flying across the room to land on the far side of the table.

"No, you're supposed to teach me," she reminds him caustically.

"You want another lesson?" he offers, shooting a warning glance at her.

“I'm certainly not here for my health,” she retorts. She couldn’t say she wants more schooling from him, but resents being at his whim enough to demand it anyway.

“Or mine,” he ripostes, crossing the room to a cupboard and rummaging around for a pack of cards, which he shuffles as he returns to the table. He rifles through the deck and spins one of the court onto the wood in front of her.

“Bring me the Queen,” he demands, but before she can reach for the card dumps a freshly peeled potato on top, “without moving the potato.”

“What is this, a riddle?” she questions with a hint of scathing.

“A task,” he answers, then with a smug streak in his hacksaw voice adds, “You wouldn’t be the first to fail it.”
She goes on to stare at the wretched thing, without any idea what to do, right up until he places a steaming bowl of food next to her.

“This is ridiculous,” she declares, no longer able to make eye contact with the card that has been silently judging as Daud cooked around her. A monarch trapped under a potato; how apt.

His chuckle makes her slightly want to choke him, and after setting down water and a basket of bread he takes a short knife and drives it straight into the middle of the table. The strike is that of an assassin, whip-quick arm driving the blade through the potato and card so suddenly it startles her.

She fixes him with an accusatory look as he reaches without breaking eye contact to tear the card out from underneath the speared potato, tossing the queen with a newly cut throat towards her.

“You didn’t say I could use a knife,” she says quietly.

“I said don’t move the potato,” he responds obtusely, then sits down and starts tearing away at bread to dip in his soup, which appears to be of more interest to him than intense bouts of staring with her.

“Pedant,” she mutters under her breath, but he only gives her a pitying glance before tucking into his meal.

She sullenly starts to eat, a necessity she almost resents, but it isn’t long before he offers up a conversational, “I’ve given that test to every assassin I taught.”

He’s a propensity towards talk at mealtimes, which she dares to speculate is something the overwhelming peace and quiet of this place cannot satisfy in him.

“How many is that?” she returns, more interested in extracting information than sociability.

“I probably trained the one that trained yours,” he remarks ambiguously; even without their founder, the Whalers are far from forgotten in Dunwall. She’s even seen them in the palace sometimes – usually being hurried away from her like she’s still naïve enough not to know what’s going on in her own household.

“By stabbing potatoes?” she queries with her most offensive tone of exceedingly polite.

“Not always,” he replies with a playful rasp, “I sometimes used a live rat.” She shudders, and reminds herself that this man has spilled the blood of far worse than rats. “It tells me they understand what the job means.”

“And whether the mark is supposed to live, apparently,” she says sourly. “Was it really necessary to make such a show?” The poor paper queen still looks upside down at her with a cut throat, and she knows he could have pulled any card out of that deck.

“A reminder for you,” he explains with his wildcat air of foreboding; like she could ever forget what stakes they were playing with.

“I am clearly not cut out to be an assassin,” she says with the intention of washing her hands of the whole thing.

“You show some promise,” he replies as ordinarily as commenting on the weather, and she hardly believes she heard it. After a not insignificant amount of time, he notices her staring and follows up with, “What?”
“I’m waiting,” she explains, chin propped on her hand.

His brow furrows, expression twisted around his scar. “For what?”

“The clause,” she remarks with a hint of a grin playing about her mouth as he scrunches his face even more.

“The what?”

“You never give an unfettered compliment,” she says with a sigh like she can’t believe he’s got the audacity to deny it. “You have to add a clause of some kind.” He looks almost surprised by this accusation. “I even failed your silly test,” she points out with a wave of her hand over the still-slain queen, who she’s considered turning face down but fears that might be even worse.

“Most people do first time,” he replies with a shrug. “I use it to make a point.”

“That potatoes are ill suited for armour?” she poses, and he huffs a silent laugh, that she finds exactly as infuriating and satisfying as every other reaction she gets out of him.

“You tell me,” he invites.

It twists her up to answer him like a mentor, when he's usually anything but, and yet she answers nonetheless.

“That an assassin cuts through anything, anyone, to get to their mark?”

His grin jars like biting into the stone of an olive.

“That’s your ninth lesson.”
The Tenth Lesson

Chapter Summary

It has been almost a day since Daud has tried to kill her. This is obviously a problem.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Emily gets through an entire breakfast without being attacked by Daud, she takes it as an unexpected mercy and bears only mild curiosity as to what he’s surely planning.

When nothing happens by lunch this becomes a cause for concern, because rather than not seeing him at all – which would confirm some ploy – she catches him here and there, ferrying baskets of produce from all corners of the grounds.

When they have gotten all the way to the evening without his so much as trying to trip her up, it’s matured into an intense suspicion that must be assuaged.

She strides into the kitchen when he’s midway through his dinner, made earlier than usual so he’s already eating rather than cooking – like he’s rushing through the day without her – to demand answers.

“What is this?” she announces like he should know exactly what she’s talking about.

He looks at her over his meal, taking a moment’s pause before giving her the answer, “Stew.” After she rolls her eyes like they might turn full circle inside her head, he carefully lays down his spoon and in plodding tones asks, “Something the matter?” like each word is a mile away from the next.

“Contrary to popular information, I’m not here for a wellness retreat,” she articulates. “Moreover, I am actually here to learn something.”

“And your point?” he invites.

“You haven’t tried to kill me all day,” she concludes. He gives a rough laugh, but like he’s been grinding the rust off his voice, it’s not quite as hoarse as when she first arrived. She wouldn’t dare guess how often he used it before she showed up.

“That’s your complaint now?” he asks with a wry hoist of his eyebrows towards his hairline.

“Well… yes,” she maintains. “You’re supposed to be training me.”

“Who says I’m not?” he poses.

“If there is a lesson to be learned in doing nothing, I can safely say I’ve missed it,” she remarks with an impatient flick of her eyes to the rafters.

“It’s always something with you, isn’t it?” he comes in with a keener edge, slumping his face against his hand so his scar weaves between dirtied fingers. “You’re tired, hungry, too hot, you
don't like my hands, traps are lazy,” he reels off. “Now the problem is I’m not doing anything?” The way he recites it makes her sound brattish, a sore point for someone whose childhood has been far from easy – no thanks to him.

“It… is a problem when I came here for a purpose,” she argues on shaky ground.

He gives a sigh she can almost feel from across the room, and starts rolling up his sleeves. She reacts as soon as his mark flashes, instinctively turning a hundred and eighty degrees and reaching a hand into thin air that soon becomes the space around his throat.

Standing at her mercy with his arms by his sides, he offers nothing more than a pulse thumping against her fingertips – blinking certainly sets her heart racing, but she wonders if it's the same for old hands that have had the power for decades.

“You'll wear an old man out,” he says in a sluggish drawl.

From inertia if nothing else, her fingers remain around his throat, and first and foremost to contradict him her response is, “You're not that old.”

She's had the same spiel from her father too many times to count; yet his complaints about ‘old bones’ quickly ceased when The Outsider offered to replace them for him. With what hadn't been specified, as far as she understands.

“Too old for this,” he bemoans, then for lack of her doing it reaches up to pull her hands off him, far less kindly than before. “Don’t think I’m not paying attention just because I haven’t thrown a parade in your honour,” he adds sourly, and she furrows her brows in the sense that something is wrong – more wrong.

“Is there a problem here?” That she has any sense to judge his mood by is unnerving, but he’s not usually like this. “Have I done something to-” she pauses, rephrasing, “that bothers you?”

“No,” he answers monosyllabically, but when he tries to move past her – like that’s the end of it – she slides in front of him to prevent an easy escape.

“Daud,” she says firmly, commanding his eyes raise up to hers. They’re dark, shuttered by heavy eyelids as he meets her gaze.

“I’m tired,” he offers coarsely, and she notices the gruelling purple tint to the bags under his eyes, muddled and nothing like the sharpness she knows he’s capable of. “Is that all right with you?”

“I… of course,” she murmurs, not expecting to find herself the aggressor – for once, it’s not something she enjoys.

It occurs to her that although he hasn’t troubled her today, Daud’s been far from idle and has filled the terrace with a sizeable haul from around the grounds. If she gives it proper consideration, she knows a plot of this size would be worked by several back in Gristol, and finally registers that he’s been juggling harvest in the heart of summer alongside training her. From the half-day she gave the work he did before giving up, she knows it’s nothing easy.

By the time she has drawn these conclusions, he’s mutely tidied up around her and is almost at the door.

“Wait,” she calls out, and for all his curtness he still stops. “I… know I can be somewhat,” she gives a reluctant pause, “… demanding.” It wasn’t the apology she had briefly considered, but the admission still rankles.
He turns to face her, leaning against the doorframe and gazing under heavy eyes.

“I wouldn’t say it’s been no trouble,” he remarks like he’s not too weary to enjoy watching her flounder.

“Quite,” she replies with a wire jaw. “I haven’t been fully considerate of the burden of my staying here. So, in light of that, I can… help.” she concludes, but his eyes convey that he doesn’t understand her. “I mean,” she elaborates, “I can assist with your…” she reaches for better words and eventually grabs whatever she has, “… agriculture.”

She’s acutely aware of how preposterous it is that a crowned Empress in the twelfth year of her reign should timidly offer to assist her mother’s assassin on a farm, and part of her still resents any kindness towards him. However, even having watched him tear her life apart, she can acknowledge – bitterly, and certainly not out loud – that he was a tool moved by worse hands. One that was never used for that purpose again, so he wants her to believe.

“All right,” he says like he’s not even half-sold on her offer, though it could also be the fatigue. “You really want to work?”

“I suppose…” she answers recalcitrantly.

“Then you start tomorrow,” he instruct gruffly. “Come find me whenever you’re up.” Said like she’s been sleeping in until the afternoon – impossible in the oven of her room, and she’d resent the accusation if she weren’t deliberately trying to be accommodating.

“Very well,” she agrees with admirable restraint.

“That’s if you bother to keep your word,” he adds outright grumpily, firing shots like she’s a valid target.

“My word is as good as a contract,” she shoots back with a warning glare. Case in point, she was still here. If she hadn’t given her word to her father that she’d stay if Daud would have her, she would’ve walked out of here days ago and not looked back.

Yet in spite of herself, and especially in spite of him, she can acknowledge that it would have been a missed opportunity. For all the bickering, resentment, stabbing and almost-killing someones – along with whatever their strange new game is – she’s actually learning.

“Hm” he murmurs in lieu of words, and as he walks away it’s obvious how bone-wrackingly exhausted he is, though with one foot out the door she finds he isn’t too tired to slip a quiet, “Goodnight,” to her – like that’s something they do – before he’s gone.

Emily rises early with the heat, and in ongoing frustration with her attire takes a knife to unevenly butcher a pair of trousers off at the knee. In combination with the torn shirt she’s not yet repaired, her appearance is a royal disgrace, but if she’s to work as Daud says, it makes little sense to do so in things she hasn’t already ruined.

No doubt if Callista saw her like this she’d do the thing where her mouth becomes as thin and tight as unsprung razor wire, which even an Empress would go to great lengths to avoid setting off. The thought of being beyond such reprimand gives her some small comfort as she tracks down Daud, who has long since been at work and is far from the house when she finally comes upon him.
He’s picking fruit from the top of a short ladder, tossing them into a shoulder-slung basket at a pace that only slows rather than stopping as she approaches.

“Here I am, a woman of my word,” she presents, holding out her arms. When he turns to look at her the peach he means to toss over his shoulder lands somewhere in the next row of trees.

“So you are,” he says like he’s nailed his tone down to a post, climbing down the stepladder and spending undue time setting down the basket from his back. “Well,” he remarks stiffly, jerking his head up the trunk of the tree he’s under. “Up you go.”

“The tree?” she suggests.

“That’s where the fruit is,” he responds dryly, “I can’t reach the top, but it should be easy for a thing like you.” He gives her an up and down that Callista would be as proud of as she would disapproving.

“What?” she challenges, knowing she’s devolved to wearing little more than rags. “It’s hot.” He gives her a look that lasts far longer than if he’d not botched something he was planning to say.

“Are you going to help or not?” he finally comes out with in a way that seems too measured, and gestures again for the tree.

“Yes, yes,” she declares with a wave of her hand, strolling out of the harsh sun into the shade of the peach tree and setting a foot between two of the boughs. She climbs as high as the branches will bear her, surrounded by sunlit leaves and fruit at various stages of ripening.

“Now what?” she calls down, bouncing on her perch to test its holding power and sending a scattering of thumps to the ground below her.

“Stop that,” he returns chidingly, “and start picking.” It seems obvious when he says it, and she hears the muted sequence of sounds that tell her he’s carrying on himself.

“That’s all?” she queries. “I thought I was going to really work.” She doesn’t quite capture the churlish mood of how he phrased it the night before, but it’s a close enough pastiche to make him sigh or laugh – it’s hard to tell from three feet above his head.

“Give it a couple of hours,” he replies knowingly, “and only take what’s ripe.”

“How can I tell?” She starts feeling the fruits hanging around her, many of which are still green and hard.

“Learn.” His voice echoing up from underneath her creates a strange effect, and she jumps when a peach flies up the wrong way through the branches next to her. She snatches it out of the air and inspects the specimen, then matches it to something similar.

“Like this?” she asks, dropping it down to him.

She hears him catch it, waiting with a bizarre sense of anticipation as he evaluates her selection. “Close enough,” he permits, tossing it gently into the basket. “Try not to bruise anything.”

“Are we still talking about the fruit?” she finds herself teasing – easier to do when all she can see of him is the top of his silver-striped head, as well as a faint spot where his hair is beginning to thin that’s only visible from this angle. She drops a peach on top of him, and as she expects he turns up to snatch it at the last moment, fixing her with a look through the leaves that makes her glad to be out of his reach.
“For now,” he responds, throwing it blind into the basket.

They work in silence initially, and as promised the work becomes arduous long before she anticipates, to say nothing of the uncompromising heat that beats relentlessly down on them.

“There’s a point when everything ripens,” he remarks out of the quiet, adopting such a lecturing tone that she knows what’s coming.

“I sense a lesson,” she jokes, stretching from high to low as she sets down an armful peaches.

“Your instincts are improving,” he returns with greater inclination to wit than praise. “Like fruit, a moment can only be picked once, so an assassin acts once – when it’s ripe.”

She considers the point as they fall back into the pattern of picking, finding the fruit with just the right amount of give under her fingers, and leaving the ones that aren’t ready for another day. It gives her an idea.

“Is that why you haven’t been coming at me so often?” she seizes. “Because you’re waiting for the right moment?”

He goes quiet, which could mean he’s about to pounce, but she looks down to find him exactly where he was, gazing up at her with an entire volume in the lines of his face – scored in a language that she’s still barely literate in.

He answers her simply.

“I’d be foolish not to.”

Chapter End Notes

Bucketloads of gushy love to everyone who's been in touch with/since the last update! It's been awesome finding familiar/new faces on tumblr and being able to chat more about this godawful garbage ship that has ruined my life.

Shoutouts to the trash!crew; alazywhaler, rosaeldi, starryundertones (unless you're one of these people on a03), nicht, anon + spoon and spookalien!
They’re walking back to the house with full baskets of peaches when Daud finally turns on her.

One moment Emily’s a pace behind him, hauling an alarmingly heavy load and cursing the heat in every way she can imagine, and the next she’s been plucked from her surroundings and finds herself on the tips of her toes against the back wall of the house, his hand squarely across her neck.

“You let your guard down,” he says quietly, their proximity letting him be heard even as he practically whispers, “finally.”

It’s been some time since he’s caught her like this and all her carefully nurtured goodwill, tended to like a seedling, withers. She can’t forget who this man is or what he’s done, yet the balance between understanding and indignation seems to tip each time he adds some small new insult or kindness. This is equivalent to dropping a lead weight on the wrong end of the scale.

The way she retaliates is to fix him with a cold look and seethe, “So did you,” before flinging her fist into the inside of his elbow.

It buckles his arm enough for her to lean forward – there isn’t much she can do except get close to him, but that’s enough when she knows how he’ll react. Her mouth makes clumsy contact with the bridge of his kinked nose, and he shakes his head like a bird and blinks away, dropping her onto her feet as he reappears several paces back.

It’s interesting to watch him struggle for words at first, then he finally manages to produce, “Is this a game to you?” like he’s reading the line off a page.

“Isn’t that what we’ve been doing all this time?” she counters, and he’s no response he’s inclined to make light of, so in barbed silence returns to picking up the mess they’ve made of his harvest.

The terrace is increasingly overrun with fruit, more than any one man could have need for, and she wonders what he’s going to do with a literal mountain of peaches, though doesn’t feel like questioning it as they dump everything and take a break over the hottest part of the day – not after being reminded of his quest to role-play a thousand of her deaths at his hands.

However, she did promise to work, and his attitude if she breaks her word is the one thing worse
than the thought of going back out there. So when he returns outside after only a couple hours rest – rather than the three of four she usually takes – it is a point of pride that she must too.

“Take longer if you need,” he dares to say when she walks out beside him.

“If you’re ready so am I,” she insists.

“I’m used to it,” he counters, but sensing he won’t talk her into turning back, instead takes the long-worn hat from his head and holds it out to her. “At least take this.”

“I’m fine,” she insists, but he won’t put it back on so she reluctantly accepts the offering, trying not to think about the sweat straw could absorb over the years and opting at first to hang it on a knot in the tree rather than on her head. After ten minutes under a sun that has only lessened from executioner to torturer in its brutality, she’s relented to being grateful for the shade it provides.

They don’t speak much, which only becomes awkward when she thinks about it too much.

“How old are these trees?” she asks in the midst of one such moment, speaking as naturally as any two people working alongside each other with a violent and complicated history could.

“…About 6 years,” he says, compliant after a small pause.

“And you grew them here?” she presses.

“Hm,” he grunts in lieu of verbal confirmation.

“Does it take long?”

“Yes,” he answers, then noticing her expectant gaze concedes to elaborate. “First harvest was three summers ago, they take a couple to mature.” It’s an archaic way to measure time but it occurs to her that he doesn’t need any more than that. Even she’s given up knowing the hour outside of certain fixed points.

“What are the oldest flora here?” she asks next, after they have changed trees and the heat is bearing down on her nurturing the beginnings of a headache. However, he shows no outward signs of flagging so she stubbornly presses on.

“The figs,” he answers more expansively by a whisker. “They put down roots long before I did.”

“How long ago was that?” she probes, slicing in a real question with the chatter. The shift in his willingness is apparent like a change in the wind, and she has to wait for him to consider his response.

“Eleven years,” he answers solemnly, glancing up at her from the ground. “What are you trying to work out?” Plucks the question like it’s ripe.

“How you came to be here,” she replies, matching his honesty with hers as she drops a peach down to him, which she watches him catch and toss in the basket, “after father spared you.” And when or how did he become the seemingly docile creature he is now – most of the time – and what’s become of the assassin.

“You really want to know?” he says like he believes the opposite.

“Of course,” she insists, living to contradict him.

“Why?” he asks, but the reasoning she tries to dig into is cold and unyielding as frozen earth.
“I’m curious,” she settles on the same safe excuse.

“I left with what I had on me that night,” he says brusquely, like telling it faster will get it over with quickly. “Took a boat to Karnaca and walked into the hills from the port. Never came back.”

“That’s it?” she queries, picturing the scene of his arrival and a long, uninterrupted march away from the past.

“It was longer in the living,” he evades. She resents her needs to know more, like some new piece of information will unlock the riddle of his character.

“What about this place?” she presses.

“I found it during the first winter,” he reveals. “Needed the shelter at first, but by spring I came to like it, so I stayed.”

“There was no one else here?” she asks incredulously.

“Naught but the rabbits,” he answers in cloying, mellow tones: a honey trap she’s learning to mistrust.

“So, you don't own this land by title?” His chuckle hangs to her like a burr.

“Spoken like a true mainlander,” he gibes, though not patronisingly enough to merit retaliation. “There was barely a roof on the house.”

“It was surely inhabited once.” she presses.

“Abandoned,” he supplies. “The hills are littered with them, families move on and leave the ancestors’ home to ruin.”

“Or someone like you,” she suggests.

“Hm,” he makes the sound again; a guttural, affirmative noise that rolls from his throat without the need to suffer words.

“You said there was no roof?” she picks up after a long enough pause to give her the certainty that she isn’t finished questioning him yet.

“Not much of it,” he replies. “Took a long time to get it to this state.” A smile breaks across Emily’s face as she realises how to fit together two more pieces of the puzzle.

“That's how I found you, you know,” she baits, and notices him catch her out of the corner of his eye. Like he doesn't want to look right at her, but can't stick to the resolution.

“Oh?” he hums in clear invitation, striking a strange balance of being amenable to interrogation without becoming talkative – perhaps because he’s working.

“I spoke to the son of a mason, who swore to me his father worked for a mysterious man over this ridge,” she reveals. “He was away for weeks at a time, and never spoke of what he was doing.”

“A good man,” Daud remarks like he knows exactly who she means. A short interval passes in which the only sound is the rustling of fruit being lifted from branches. “How’s his boy?”

“What?” she doesn't quite catch the inquiry at first, sure it must have been something else.
“The son,” he reiterates, “He’s grown?”

“Oh, yes,” she answers bemusedly. “He was of age, I suppose. I didn’t pay too much attention.” Too busy tracking him down to worry over the biometrics of every villager she interviewed.

“Always pay attention,” he chides, and she senses a lecture in the wind.

“Is that my next lesson?” she prompts, but loses him in the step.

“What?” he says distantly, staring into space as the moment blows away on the dry summer breeze. “I thought they’d have forgotten about me.”

“Reputation can be a hard to shake,” she comments, tempting fate – or Daud, at least – to see how or if he bites.

“Hm,” is his solemn comment, but she’s sure he knows it better than anyone.

An insidious pain intensifies in Emily’s head over the afternoon, growing from a niggling ache to something closer to the sensation of a knife sliding between the back of her neck and her skull. She considers that she may have been in the sun too long, becoming increasingly light-headed and more than a little groggy; however, Daud persists and she refuses to lose face to him.

She's reaching sluggishly for a fruit when blinking no longer banishes the spots of light dancing in front of her eyes, and consciousness starts spiralling away from her like flood waters down a drain. She processes that Daud is saying something – maybe her name – but she can barely hear him, like one of them is at the bottom of a well, and as her head finally spins loose from her shoulders she slips from her perch like disturbed snowfall.

Instead of hitting the ground, like she expects in her dimly-lit mind, it is Daud’s arms and a strangled grunt that meet her on the way down, catching her with ungainly fumbling in the scarce seconds he has to react.

“I...” she begins in a play at coherence as he staggers unevenly back to stand, jostling her in his grip like a rolled rug.

An attempt to meet his eyes hurts more than she can bear, light burning straight through to the back of her skull, so she drops the act and goes limp as a ragdoll, putting a hand over her face and focusing on not throwing up as she rides back to the house in his arms.

She feels each of his footsteps on the lengthy walk back, methodical as a heartbeat, and every small bump sends a new jet of pain up through her head. He shows no strain in carrying her, used to loads many times her weight, and over the din of the tones in her ear and whirling of her head, she's aware of how small she feels tucked between his arms just enough to resent it.

Even with her face in her hands she can tell when they pass indoors, and retains just enough wherewithal to put out an arm to stop him climbing the stairs with her.

“No,” she says weakly at the right moment, putting up no fight whatsoever but keeping them in place because he won't push against her wobbly arm on the corner of the stairwell. She knows where he's trying to take her and what it will be like at this time of day. “s'Hot,” she mumbles, even though she can't fully hear herself over the chiming in her ears.
She feels his sigh ghost over her skin, and instead of climbing the stairs he keeps walking, jostling the bundle of not very much that she is as he opens his door and carries her inside, setting her down on a bed.

His palm settles against her forehead as she spreads out, nursing like Callista or her father when she was a feverish child, and she shifts away from the unwelcome heat.

“How do you feel?” he asks, and even through the haze she’s still divided by any demonstration that he could or should care for her.

“Dizzy,” she answers after little deliberation, closing her eyes and laying a hand over them. “Sick.” The darkness is such an improvement she elects remain in it, even when Daud leaves the room and comes back to press a cup into her hand. She sits up just enough to drink, only to find the water is salted and give a guttural retch as it hits her stomach.

“I know,” he says, too close and soft-spoken. “Finish it and I’ll bring a fresh one.”

“You don’t have to... I’m not a child,” she says in such a tone as to totally undermine her argument. She tests opening her eyes but the experience is so awful she shuts them right away, taking another bracing sip as she pulls a face indicative of her happiness with the situation. “Why salt?”

“For the sunstroke,” he answers sagely. “It’ll get worse before it gets better.”

“Wonderful,” she manages to deliver with a passable enough deadpan to make him chuckle.

“Do you feel cold?” he asks, and the backs of his fingers touch inquisitively against her cheek, then brush her neck all too naturally. He pulls them back like lightning when she shivers all over.

“Not until you did that,” she replies through chattering teeth, and finally drains her cup, holding it out to be taken away and refilled.

She hears him leave and hazards a peek at her surroundings, wincing against the dim light let in through the slats of shutters on his windows. The room spans the entire end of the house; she make out the shapes of furniture, but cannot pick out details without her stomach churning so soon closes her eyes again.

It’s frustrating that she should be so incapacitated for this opportunity to examine the last unexplored corner of the house – Daud’s stronghold – but knows it is only because of her foolish overexertion that he brought her here.

The sounds of his return prompts her to hold up a hand for a new cup, half-raising in bed – his bed – to take sips of thankfully clear water.

“You should cool down,” he remarks as she flops back down, and she hears the swish and trickle of water being wrung out over a container.

“I’m already cold,” she protests weakly – or was she hot, it was difficult to tell.

“It’ll feel that way,” he murmurs again, coarse tones of his voice stretching over the words like rough-hewn blankets. “Even so.”

She senses his hand nearing her face, drops of water pattering onto her forehead and the bedsheets around her, so blindly grabs for his wrist and pulls the wet flannel from her face to stomach with a primal shudder.
“Best to… sleep it off,” he mutters as he reclaims the arm she brought along on the journey, and if she weren't actively heat-crazed she'd be sure he sounds bashful.

“Here?” she tests.

“You've made yourself so comfortable,” he retorts with enough sarcasm to kindle a spark of guilt.

“Upstairs is too-” She’s interrupted by her own shiver, racking her body involuntarily.

“I know,” he soothes, “Don't worry about it.” There’s a pause that she would’ve thought was him leaving if she didn’t have the senses to know he’s still right next to her. “I was the one who pushed you.”

“I pushed me,” she rephrases, reaching for the cloth in the bucket at the bedside and only half-wringing it out before draping it over her eyes, water trailing down her temples and sinking into the pillow under her head. “Don't let me cut your work-day short,” she announces, waving a hand with the suspicion that he would love to revel in outlasting her.

“We did plenty,” he assures her. “Keep drinking.” It feels like wearing shoes backwards to let him – anyone outside of her father and Callista – fuss over her like this. She abhors being doted on, but with him there is a deeply buried satisfaction that she can't quite place, like it's part of his penance.

“I'll be in the kitchen,” he announces to the sounds of getting up. “The door's open, if you need anything.”

“I'm fine,” she says in spite of the evidence.

“Hm,” he makes the throaty sound again, tweaked this time to suggest that he doesn't believe her but won't argue, and leaves her in the lap of his home.

Right down to the pillow she lays her head on, everything is laced with his presence whether she likes it or not – a question she can't even answer herself – and she falls asleep drowning in it.

Emily wakes deep into the night, and laying in the dark initially finds no sign of Daud – until a snore startles her half-out of her skin. She gets up, relieved to find her head feels less likely to crack open, and by the flickering of an oil lamp makes out the shelves stuffed with books that span almost an entire wall of the room… and a crooked leg protruding from behind an armchair.

Approaching with what she knows is a highly appropriate amount of caution, she discovers the Knife of Dunwall slumped back in the well-worn chair, one leg propped on a stool and an open book resting on his chest. She winces to make out the title of the material that put him so firmly to sleep, but can only divine that it is about horticulture.

Knowing better than to disturb him in this state, she takes a moment to examine him while he's as disarmed as he gets. Dark hair raked with silver draws into arches of a widow’s peak, shadows flickering over the recesses that time has wrung in his face; it’s not the one she remembers from the day her mother died – was killed. The visage her memory paints is crueler, more disfigured by the scars that shape him, and less painfully human.

When she's scoured every line in the face of the man who tore her life apart, with a careful hand she reaches for the lamp and blows the flame out, making her way back to her own stifling room in the dark.
Chapter End Notes

Being burdened with incredible paleness, I share Emily's suffering with sunstroke and can testify that it totally sucks - unfortunately (or fortunately depending on your perspective) that's where our shared experience ends.

Hope the morsels of (my) Daud's post-game version of events feel legit, I've hinted to some people that there's significance in the where/how he lives, and the way he gets there ties into it too so there's plenty to read into at this point. Speculate wildly and at liberty.

Big shoutouts to the trash!ship crew; Nicht, Anonymous + Spoon, Lazywhaler, RosaEldi, Spookalien, GasMaskMonster, starryundertones, Stirtheblood and Le Anon, you're all wonderful and reading your comments and hearing your thoughts is always a pleasure. In fact, with a crew of this size I think we might need a bigger boat...
The Twelfth Lesson

Chapter Summary

It's a testament to their progress that 'how are you?' has become an acceptable question to ask between them.

Whether or not they like it is another matter.

Chapter Notes

Big loves to all the crew as usual, and welcome aboard to any new readers who've gotten this far and are ready to join the garbage ship. We sail for trash island. It's a loooooooong way away, but the journey's gonna be fun.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s well after midday when their paths cross the day after Emily’s bout with sunstroke; she's half-asleep in the hammock when Daud steams up to the terrace with a full haul on his back.

“How're you feeling?” he asks as plain as day as she stirs, sitting up to watch him unload an inordinate number of peaches without paying tribute to this victory of normal conversation.

“Better,” she answers about as easily, and beheld to the way she was raised begrudges him a, “Thank you,” though she doesn't say what for.

“Don’t mention it,” he dismisses as he unloads yet more fruit to the ever-growing pile, adding, “Drink plenty of water,” in a way that makes her stomach kick.

“I don’t require a nursemaid,” she informs him with an air of warning.

“Good,” he retorts. “In that case you can get back to work.”

She’s recovered well enough, but still doesn’t care for another bout with the incinerating sun, so narrows her eyes and asks, “Doing what?”

“Cut up as much as you can,” he says, gesturing at the peaches, “Destone and slice.”

“With a knife?” she asks in jest rather than permission.

“Be careful,” he warns with a tempting streak of humour.

“Dare I ask why this accords such an exception?” she remarks in a dangerously cheeky tone. “Surely man cannot survive on sliced peaches alone.”

“They’ll be dried,” he replies with a slip of a sigh in his voice, like if he wanted an apprentice he would’ve chosen someone less inclined to questions, “to last through winter.”
“Oh… of course,” she plays out with false confidence. “Anything else?” A covering taunt, and he makes a low noise like he’s really considering it.

“Try to stay out of trouble,” he answers, and she doesn’t know how many ways he means it.

Blade in hand, Emily spends the day discovering the best and worst ways to cut up a peach. By the late afternoon her hands are sweet and sticky enough to trap flies, and she’s developed a categorical edict against the very existence of the peach. Daud eventually passes by, but only to dump a handful of carrots by her elbow.

“Diced,” he gives as an entire explanation, and she complies with silent relief that it’s not fruit.

He watches her from the corner of his eye as he lays out an ocean of sliced peaches to dry in the sun, then returns to the kitchen without a word. She wonders if – or when – he’ll seize an opportunity to test her reflexes, but knows it’s only when she forgets to be aware of him that she’s vulnerable, so gets on with the menial work like there’s nothing else to be concerned by.

In a mundane turn of events, he comes out to collect the carrots and gives her a bunch of celery.

“Diced?” she suggests, and he simply nods and goes back inside. From where she sits, chopping against the wooden tabletop on the terrace, she can see him moving back and forth across the kitchen. It’s become second nature to tune her ear to the sounds he makes, the hissing of oil and sandaled footsteps that tell her where he is and what he’s doing.

He comes out as soon as she’s done and doesn’t give her anything else to chop, so she goes to the water pump to wash away the remaining peach residue – which has solidified into a tacky adhesive – from all the absurd places it’s managed to get. Such as behind her ears.

Holding her head awkwardly under the pump, trying to wash the gluey mix of peach and Serkonian sand-dirt off her body, she comes to the conclusion that it’s pointless and resorts to tipping a bucket over her head, drenching herself head to toe and cooling down nicely in the process.

She suspects the building the pump backs onto counts as the official bathing facilities, bearing a rig at the top of a wall that lets water shower down through holes drilled in the bottom of a bucket. The mostly-open setup and lack of heating doesn’t tempt her to strip for a proper wash, but she tries it clothed and ends up putting several buckets through the system as she rinses herself mostly-clean.

She refastens hair that is constantly falling out of its binding and wonders why she even bothers, given how hard it is to retain any semblance of a dignified appearance in this environment.

Not so for Daud, who by the time she comes back has changed the greyish rough-cut shirt she’s watched him sweat and work in for something that actually looks tailored for once. He’s pushed embroidered cuffs up to his elbows, but the dropped collar gives it away as far from the fashions of Dunwall, and as evening drifts over the hills he carries out two dishes that he places on the table next to her. She peers over to find that it is to all intents and purposes – pasta.

“You made this?” she asks with disarmed marvel.

“No, I grow it,” he retorts scathingly, still on his feet. “You’re wet,” he delivers like he doesn’t understand.
“I was dirty,” she answers simply.

“What about your clothes?” There’s a rare tension in his voice, which she meets with a manicured smile.

“Those too.”

“Hm,” he murmurs, giving her an unusually intense look before going back inside.

When he comes out again she sees two glasses clasped in the fingers of one hand, and a carafe in the other.

“What’s that, pray tell?” she pries, managing to put down a tantalising fork of food long enough to speak. He can cook, although she won’t flatter him if she can help it – he certainly never does.

“Wine,” he says in his voice like tearing parchment, and then addressing the disbelief plastered across her face explains, “I make a little each year.” Yet more that she doesn’t know, and wouldn’t have guessed in a lifetime.

“Is this a special occasion?” she says without being sure if she’s teasing or testing. The idea that he’s acting differently in light of her condition yesterday – and whether he feels guilty about it – is an unwelcome intrusion to her thoughts.

“It goes with the food,” he answers plainly, pouring himself a glass and leaving another standing as an open invitation. With carefully curated self-control, she waits at least a few minutes before pouring herself one, and several more before she takes a sip – like it’s not something she’s missed.

“Not bad,” she judges. It isn’t the finest she’s ever tasted but is solidly drinkable.

“I try,” he remarks, and it sounds odd on him, like he should be too proud to admit to being a novice at anything.

It’s quicker to eat and drink in the creeping lengths of silence they fall into as the sun sinks over the hills. The view from the terrace is marvellous, and he seems just as content as she is to watch without talking while they slowly drain their glasses. He gets up when darkness falls, but rather than retire for the night, simply lights a few lamps that cast the terrace in a passable glow and refills his – and her – glass.

Confronting the reality of spending more time in his company, Emily decides to share something she’s been tending to in the back of her head.

“There’s a rumour about you back in Dunwall,” she says somewhere near the bottom of her second cup. His poker face holds strong as usual, not even turning to acknowledge her.

“It wouldn’t be the first,” he remarks without fluster, but she has nothing else to do with her evening but fish so keeps going.

“It was about a witch.” She’s put enough attention into his face to see the reaction that darts across it for just a moment.

“I’ve known a few,” he replies in a fairly convincing lilt. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“Do I?” she returns, “I think you know who.”

“You can’t,” he says gruffly, beginning to give away inch by inch of contested ground as he spares
a glance her way.

“Things have a way of coming out,” she baits further, relishing the moment of power.

“If you’re thinking of that witch, then I would be very wary,” he delivers stiffly.

“I haven’t even told you what the rumour is yet,” she points out.

“I don’t want to know,” he replies.

“Why not?” she asks, almost downcast.

“It’s in the past,” he says emphatically, like he’s afraid of turning into salt if he so much as looks back.

“You’re not curious?” she probes.

“Either it’s true and I already know it, or it’s a lie and means nothing,” he answers roughly, sipping on what is possibly his third glass of wine.

“It matters to me if it’s true,” she reveals quietly, and finds that she means it.

“Then tell me,” he says like he couldn’t care less either way.

“Will you answer?”

“Maybe.” He takes another sip, lamplight cutting him out almost in profile.

“It was that you battled a powerful witch over a conspiracy for the throne and… were the architect of her downfall,” she regales less impressively than she meant to. His presence makes her cagey tonight, like there’s a new threat in the air.

“Hm.” His throat bobs as he makes the sound, and he swills wine in his glass like he’s chasing thoughts around the rim.

“So?” she prompts.

“That was all a long time ago,” he comments emptily.

“How long?” she presses, quietly confident he would have reacted differently if it was false. “Was it after-”

“I came here after Corvo spared me,” he cuts in. “I told you that already.”

“So then it was,” she grasps against her better judgement for the logical conclusion, “before?”

“What does it matter?” he turns back on her.

“I’m curious about what happened,” she says. “Don’t you owe me that much?” Returning his words to him, he gives her a long look that sends something crawling down her spine, but turns back to the sky before he answers.

“A bitter woman tried to play a rotten hand,” he says too carefully to be playing his cards far from his chest. It seems like that’s all he’s willing to say, but she’s not satisfied.

“So you…?” she leads.
“Stopped her.”

“Hm,” she murmurs, then promptly realises it’s one of his characteristics and plunges into a guilty spiral. She asks the only thing she can without folding. “Why?”

He considers this for even longer than before, refilling his glass and taking a deep drink before answering.

“I thought it was the right thing to do.”

Right, she echoes in her head, wanting to flip the table and scream was it right to kill my mother?

Except she knows the nature of what his answer would be, because she’s not so blind as to think the two aren’t connected.

“So you fought a witch for me,” she surmises, testing him – because she can, and hopes it makes him uncomfortable.

The carafe empties with the last splash that she sinks defiantly into her glass, and she’s taking a long drink when he finally croaks in his hoarse timbre.

“Yes.”

Like pulling back a curtain she sees picture they make; sitting almost side by side in the fragrant night air, lamplight picking up the white of his neatly tailored shirt and shocks of silver in his hair, as he reveals in measured steps what he’s done for her – like it’s enough.

To sit in the company of this man; who set in motion the most traumatic events of her life, and whose mastery of the assassin’s blade is every reason she is here – for him to tell her that yes, his hands that’d taken her mother’s life had also guarded hers. Then to lounge in balmy summer air and eat and drink as the sun goes down – that it might even be enjoyable – couldn’t be acceptable.

One of his earliest lessons echoes back to her unbidden; that there’s only two things she can truly do in such a situation – and she’s certainly not running.

“… Fight,” she blurts like she’s coming up from a riverbed, thrashing blindly for the surface. “We should fight,” she turns it into.

“What?” he asks, one brow dropping lower than the other, pinned in place by the carnage down one side of his face.

“What?” he asks, one brow dropping lower than the other, pinned in place by the carnage down one side of his face.

“As part of my training,” she adjusts the line. “You’ve recovered, haven’t you?”

“More or less,” he answers. She knows he’s making light of it because she stitched him back up herself, but every instinct in her body is telling her that if she doesn’t start a fight with Daud right now, then they will fall into far more dangerous territory. Combat was home, and she didn’t know what this was.

“We haven’t settled the matter of which of us would win in an even match,” she declares, and the look he gives her is somewhere between incredulity and amusement.

“It needs settling?” Nothing he does is sudden, from the way he leans forward to the careful procession of each word he offers. More than anything, she feels like he’s in control and can’t abide it.
“Of course,” she insists. “Besides, I usually practice far more than this. I need to keep my arm in.”

“Naturally,” he humours, and she’d throw the remaining half-glass of wine in his face and challenge him to a duel if she had a single good reason to do it. “You think it’s a fair contest?” he suggests like she’s all of ten years old asking Corvo to practice swords with her.

“You don’t?” she retorts, stepping with something like relief back into the conflict that keeps her feet on solid ground. “After all, my father defeated you, and I’ve bested him.” He gives her an up and down over the brim of his glass.

“You’ve beaten Corvo?” he says like he doesn’t believe it for a second.

“Not every time,” she admits, “but I should be able to take you. You’re more used to handling potatoes than people.” It’s meant to be more inflammatory than amusing, so when he laughs it’s all she can do not to go for him.

“That might be the case,” he remarks, and then with a telling tilt of his head to one side, asks her, “What do you think it’ll prove?”

It’s not the first time he’s touched this nerve; that she’s trying to prove something – to him, herself, or anyone that’ll listen – and the point sticks like a dart.

“That even you can’t kill me.”

“You’re not there yet,” he says in such a surefire way that she slams her glass on the table and is disappointed when he doesn’t even flinch.

“Prove it,” she demands, and he releases a long breath wearing an expression she’d like to tear off his face.

“You really want to fight?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Me.”

“Exactly.”

“And what do you expect to come of it?”

“That’s what I plan to find out.”

“You have an invasive research method,” he quips like he still can’t take her seriously, and her patience frays ever-thinner.

“If you think it’ll be so easy to best me, Daud, then by the Outsider just fucking do it!” she snaps, and that gets his attention. She’s finally managed to jolt something out of his fired-clay face, and bears teeth in her grin as she announces, “It can be my next lesson.”

He presses thumb and forefinger into the recesses of his eyes and sighs as he concedes, “Very well.”
This is probably one of those chapters where I'm most likely to muck up what will be the new canon when DH2 comes out... but I couldn't resist wriggling some of this backstory in so here's to hoping it's not a total mess.
The Thirteenth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Daud fights instinct, and Emily fights just about everything else.

Chapter Notes

So focused on updating this chapter that I forgot to add notes...

Some of the early influences I drew on for this fic/pairing were the delicious silver-screen legends Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall (e.g. http://24.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lth6htt1I41r16fw0o1_500.jpg), and my writing playlist can be found here (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLYs9dh1XEc7W_EcUDqOulhTLpi9CgfAe).

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“So you’ll fight?” she asks, clarifying the hard-earned victory against her mother’s assassin.

“If we must,” Daud sighs, making it abundantly clear that he’d rather not. Unfortunately the alternative seems to be keeping amicable company with each other, and Emily can’t have that.

“To win.”

“Always,” he affirms, and for all his agreement still slouches back against the table on the terrace like he hasn’t a care in the world. But she knows better than to take that as a lack of preparation, and when she lunges towards him the mark on his hand lights up and he vanishes.

He blinks into his natural resting place just behind her, but she’s already turning and throws a punch round at him. To her disdain she notices he still holds a glass of wine in his other hand, even daring to take a sip as he leans away from her swing. She swipes for the glass and he steps back, toying with her as her attempts to hit him turn up nothing but wasted energy. If she only had her sword, she thinks, but her weapons are safely stored upstairs, and doubts she could get close without him catching wind.

“Put that down,” she snaps, grabbing for his arm only to graze the fabric of his shirt.

“Why?” he returns over the rim of his drink. She lashes out a hand and manages to slap the glass from his, sending it flying through the air spilling its contents, but he blinks and catches it before it hits the ground.

“You’re underestimating me,” she warns, furious that he’s prioritising tablewear over her.

He wanders over to set the glass carefully on the end of the table, moving like he hasn’t a single reason to hurry, and looks straight at her as he returns the words. “Prove it.”
Only partly out of spite – because she has an idea as well as a temper – she grabs her glass, drains the last of the wine, and then tosses it across the terrace. She starts running, arriving at the collision zone to meet Daud as he blinks after it. The wild energy of her sprint flows down her arm as her fist connects with his jaw, knocking him so off-course that he misses the catch, and the glass sails onto the stone patio and smashes.

A look crosses his face that should’ve been intimidating, but to her, tonight, is a victory: she’s annoyed him.

Time for revelry is short, because no sooner has she locked eyes and read the measure of his frustration than he blinks again. She knows where he’s going, and dives forward as he materialises behind her, rolling away and then swinging out a leg for one of his ankles. He steps over her kick with ease, but the momentum carries through and helps her to her feet just in time to dodge a hand headed for her neck.

She closes her fingers around his wrist and turns alongside him, throwing her fist into the back of his elbow and buckling his arm, but before she can do anything else he shakes her off with a kick like a horse, flinging her across the terrace. He’s less tempered than usual, which makes him seem stronger, she tells herself as she skids to an uneven stop with her heels at a pile of peaches, fighting to stay on her feet.

He leans away from the first overripe peach she hurls at him, catches the second, and the next thing he knows she's flung an entire armful at him and comes soon after the barrage. She plants one foot firmly behind his ankle and lands her hands flat against his shoulders, pushing to fell him like a tree. He starts to tip, but blinks before he loses balance; knowing where that means he's likely to be, she changes tactic and throws her head back as he appears behind her. Thinking she’d be predictable, he’s moving forward as if she were going to run away.

“Nice try,” she spits as the back of her head connects with his jaw. He makes a noise and slides back a step, giving her room to turn on him elbow-first. His hand closes around her arm to stop her landing another blow on what she can see is a freshly busted bottom lip, a growing well of blood poised to break down his chin.

He’s stopped her half-way through an attack, and takes the opening to hit her in the side with an open palm. She feels the air kick out of her chest and lets slip a noise that she would've rather stifled, allowing herself be knocked across the patio to buy some space between them as she assesses the battlefield. He has her beaten in strength, and they're nearly matched in speed, so she needs a better advantage.

One of the windows into the kitchen is open not too far behind her, so without losing time to check what he's doing she turns and vaults through it, landing in a crouch on the counter with eyes alternately on the shelves by her side and the door where she expects him imminently.

Daud follows her into the kitchen only to have his course cut short by a large pot slicing across the room, bouncing off the far wall with a resonant clang. He snatches the rim before it hits the floor, but by then she's skirted along the counter and closed her fingers around the handle of a knife.

He comes at him while he's putting the pot back, rounding the kitchen table and resting in the comfort of being armed as she slashes close enough to his cheek to practically give him a shave. He interrupts her next swipe, smacking the flat of the blade out of the way and grabbing her wrist in his other hand. The lock he puts on her arm is one she once showed him, something she now regrets as he easily plucks the knife out of her fingers.

“No knives,” he says firmly, and without further ceremony throws it out the open door.
A sound of frustration slips unguarded from her lips, and she pushes against the space where his thumb and forefinger meet to break his grip and snatch her hand back. He’s not bad per se, but his technique is unrefined.

She gets her palms on the top of the table and swings her legs over it, hurtling for the rack of knives at the back of the counter. No sooner has she brushed against the handles than she feels him blink in behind her, and a hand falls heavily between her shoulder-blades, forcing her chest to the counter.

He dares to tut, clicking his tongue as he leans over her to grab the knives he’s just stopped her reaching, a firm palm keeping her bent over the counter.

“Didn’t I warn you about this?” he remarks as he takes the knives and throws them out the window; punishment for her itchy sword hand. He could've kept one for himself, but seems to think he's won, indisposed as she is.

“Didn't I tell you not to underestimate me?” she retorts furiously, and stamps on his foot to buy the second she needs to get her fingers around the sugar pot and throw it at him. He takes it stolidly to the cheek, but loosens his grip just enough that she can stretch further and snatch the handle of a frying pan that sat just beyond her reach until now.

The cast-iron pan that he probably cooked for her with gives a dull metallic ring as it glances lightly off his temple. He wisely backs away before she takes his nose off with a second swing, and she takes full advantage of the change in tides and advances with broad sweeps that drive him across the kitchen.

He’s scowling as he paces backwards across the fireplace, loosing something that could reasonably be described as a snarl before turning his head to spit blood into the ashes. He rips a poker off the wall and meets her next swing metal on metal, the vibrations running all the way down her arm.

“You're going,” he snarls as they meet strike for strike, “to dent it.”

“What do you expect?” she retorts, leaning out of a strike and countering to no success. “You threw away all the knives.”

A few more blows clank with irregular rhythm, then Daud gives another grunt and moves fast to push the end of the poker into the rim of her makeshift weapon, forcing it from her hand and launching the abused kitchenware across the room to clatter noisily to the floor.

He overextends in disarming her, and she capitalises on it by grabbing the middle of the poker as it flies wide. She turns it over, twisting his wrist the wrong way until his arm buckles or he has to let go. The moment his grip releases she grabs it in both hands and pushes for his neck; they're close enough to the wall that if she can get him against it by the throat the fight is hers.

Unfortunately he’s just quick enough to get a hand between the metal and his throat, and shoves it back so hard she has to choose between taking a short flight across the room or ducking. She does the latter and pops up on the other side, but realises it was a poor choice when he uses the poker behind her and himself in front to spin her across the short distance to the wall.

With the looming possibility of losing if she can't secure some space between herself, Daud, and the rapidly approaching brick wall, Emily throws down her last card and lurches forward instead of back, wetting her lips with fresh blood.

Instead of eliciting the retreat she’s counting on, he continues to apply himself with unrelenting
pressure, leaving her mouth exactly where she left it as he pushes against her until she’s flat to the wall. The uncompromising weight of him against her brings back memories of the time she caught him asleep and he almost cut her throat. This is the Daud he doesn’t like to lay ownership to, who runs sandpapery hands up to her wrists and locks them down as her back meets the cool brickwork.

Only when she’s unquestionably beaten does he pull back, and the ominous twist of his features around his scar tells her the assassin – the Knife – isn’t all that far from the surface.

She refuses to be scared in front of him. “You’re hurting me,” she delivers in an unwaveringly composed register. Of course he’s hurt her as they’ve knocked each other through the house, leaving a trail of chaos in their wake, but that was in good sport – and she doesn’t want to play anymore.

She meets his eyes as they move up to hers, irises almost black in the dim light of the kitchen. He lets out a breath that seems to snag in his throat, close enough that she feels it over her skin, and then the vice-like pressure lifts.

“You wanted a fight,” he says hoarsely, and though he's in control, she can hear resentment eking out of every syllable.

“I... thought I could win,” she replies on uneven breaths she’s still trying to catch. His hands come away from her wrists like there was never a threat, though she won’t forget that there was and is.

“Hope you learned your lesson,” he says a shade too vindictively for her liking.

*Number thirteen*, she thinks but won’t say. Doesn’t want him to know she’s counting.

“There’s no need to be so bitter,” she accuses. “You won.”

“I didn't want this,” he replies with the texture of a saw ripping through timber. “Any of it.”

“Neither did I,” she fires back indignantly. “It’s not as if this arrangement is *my* doing.”

“Then *leave!*” he interrupts like he’s just pulled the trigger on a round she didn’t realise was loaded. He’s staring right at her as he says it, and in the moment she’s absolutely certain he’s serious.

She couldn’t ask for a more open invitation; if she walks away now she could be back on a ship to Dunwall with a perfect account of being thrown out by her unwelcome host. While part of her would love nothing more than to storm out of here to never return – and not least because she has to contradict him any way she can – she’s not going anywhere.

“No,” she tells him with quiet resolution, holding his gaze with the solemnity of taking an oath. “Not until I beat you.” The light exaggerates his expression, casting flickering shadows over the contours of his face, catching fire on the brushes of silver in the stubble across his jaw.

“Why are you doing this?” he bites, clearly displeased with her answer. “What do you want?”

“To win.”

“You won’t get there with foolish games,” he growls, and she feels a phantom pressure against her wrists where he pinned her, like he left some presence there that still responds to his temper.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she says defensively, and he raises a hand to her face to run the pad of his thumb across her lower lip, wiping away what could be safely assumed to be his blood.
“Oh,” she murmurs sheepishly.

“Why?” he asks like it pains him. Although they're no longer fighting, the way he talks is like they are – lacking the restraint that defines him at most other times.

“You don’t like it,” she answers off the cuff, operating easily in antagonism, but his face changes in front of her eyes.

“And why would think that?” he comments with the understated implication that she’s off the mark.

“Well… you can’t get away fast enough,” she argues in spite of the feeling of the ground beneath her feet shifting, “usually.” It was she who lobbied so enthusiastically for him to take the fight seriously, so perhaps ought to be less surprised that he did.

“My preference is that you don’t,” he remarks uncomfortably, then innocuously adds, “but not liking isn’t the problem.”

“Oh,” she responds, and then on further consideration, clarifies, “Oh.” The space between them feels incalculably smaller, and she wonders exactly what he means – or if it's what it sounds like.

“So if you think you've caused enough trouble for one night,” he carries on too ordinarily for comfort. “Perhaps we could refrain from destroying any more of my property?”

“Fine,” she concedes bitterly, sounding smaller than she would like. With the disapproving voices of all her mentors in her ears, and looking for a change of subject, she begrudges the admission, “Sorry about your glass.”

In her studies of his face, the lopsided lift in his eyebrows suggests to her he wasn't expecting an apology, and makes her glad she offered it, if only to surprise him.

“Don’t be,” he delivers before walking away.

Chapter End Notes

This is probably one of the most dramatic chapters yet, so hope y'all enjoyed and AS ALWAYS much love and appreciation to the crew of the trash ship, which given we're 30k in is pretty much anyone who's read up til this point. Well done!!! Thanks!!! Other things!!!!
The Fourteenth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Dust settles – Emily doesn’t.

Emily enters the kitchen in the morning to find everything disturbed by last night’s conflict has been put back to rights, and by the light of a new day she's hard pressed to believe it any of it was real. Careful consideration over a tumultuous sleep had led her to the conclusion that ‘after several glasses of wine’ may not have been the best time to challenge anyone to a fight, much less him.

She wonders whether the drink had any sway over him, and thinks she remembers what he said at the moment they crossed over from games into something else, but more vividly recalls how she felt when he said it. For all she’s learned about him as the days pass, she’s never felt so close to the real Daud as when they fight without restraint.

He’s nowhere to be found when she wakes, so she wastes time until the inevitable tempering of boredom with temptation becomes too much to resist and sets out under no auspices about her intentions.

Walking down corridors of trees breathing the clean, leafy air – far from the salt and smoke that permeates Dunwall – she gazes out at a landscape untampered by human presence, and is struck by the sight of what the world could be without their interference.

She finds him snapping something from the branches of the ancient figs near one of the ruined outbuildings on the land, with tumbledown walls that could predate the main building. Approaching slowly, she stays lightfooted and finds her way into his blind spot, examining him for any reaction to her presence.

The fact that he hums as he works makes her think she might still have the element of surprise, and when she’s sure she cannot get any closer without setting him off – possessed by she doesn’t know what – she breaks into a sprint.

He reacts only after she puts down a foot after her first bound, turning as she flies at him late enough that she’s already taken a second leaping stride and launched herself at him. The only thing that crosses her mind is an instinct to hunt, no further thought to what she’ll do if she actually catches him; a point that increases in relevance when she makes contact just as he tries to blink away, and inadvertently takes her with him.

She finds blinking disorientating even when her father does it with full warning, so this is like being dragged into white water without a lifeline. As she’s churned through the void the only thing she can tell is that it feels different, though it doesn’t affect the overwhelming nausea that comes on her as they reappear.

The momentum of her tackle unexpectedly carries through, and she flies into him like she’s been shot from a catapult. They tumble to the ground, and she finally comes to a stop writhing on uneven landing with the primary concern of keeping her breakfast where she put it.

“Ughhhh,” she groans, putting a hand to her stomach. “I’m never going to get used to that.”
A noise from underneath her draws attention to the terrain she’s come to rest on, and as her heaving gut settles she comes more closely to terms with how she’s sprawled on top of Daud in the searing midday sun.

He looks at her with a touch of bemusement showing through the cracks in his mask, wincing against the sunlight as he asks, “Can I help you with something?”

“I was… looking for you,” she blurts, scrambling into a patch of shade cast by one of the unevenly clustered fig trees like it was what she’d been trying to do all along.

“I see,” he replies evenly as he sits up. His hat lies on the ground back where she tackled him a few metres away. “Dare I ask why?” he adds in way she could be mistaken for thinking is mockery, though she decides to let it slide in favour of finding an explanation she can safely use.

“I’m bored.” It’s the best she can offer.

He scoffs and gets to his feet, but she stays slung across shady ground, watching him return to a bough and work along it breaking off smaller branches.

“Then you have two options,” he announces, resuming his work with a calm that tells nothing of the storm they blew at each other last night. “Do you want to work or a lesson?”

She considers the options in light of several days of significantly more of one than the other.

“A lesson.”

“Hm,” he murmurs, and she finds the pitch of his mood like she's a tuning fork. “You're becoming competent at evading me, but no assassin worth their fee would jump at a mark like that.” She recalls all of a sudden how much of his teaching relied on criticising her and rolls her eyes.

“It worked, didn’t it?” she challenges.

“Too risky,” he replies. “Anyone pulling moves like that wouldn’t be alive long.”

“Because you would lecture them to death?” she baits.

“It draws attention,” he retorts, “which brings the law, and as soon as people know who you are it all starts to unravel.” He stares intensely at his hands as he works, ripping away potential with every would-be branch he prunes. “An assassin should be the last thing anyone notices in a room.”

“An astute lesson,” she observes wryly, “though I do consider advice on the importance of a low profile somewhat contradictory from the assassin infamous enough to be immortalised on canvas by Anton Soloklov.” There is a twitch in his poker face that makes her think he wasn’t expecting that, and a slowing of his hands before he stops and actually turns to look at her.

“There’s a painting.—”

“Of you?” she finishes with an unabashedly wicked grin. “Oh yes.”

To relish this revelation is fair reward for the one time she’d actually seen the damn thing; a child naively going through Corvo’s things, unravelling a roll of canvas only to start screaming her head off. She’s no idea what her father did with it – why he took it in the first place, even – though after he’d found her tear-stained curled up in his room she wouldn’t put it past him to have given it to flames.
It was a matter of years before she became privy to the rumours that Sokolov’s portraiture included the Empress’s assassin, and realised what she’d found. Unsurprisingly, her inclination to search the piece out was non-existent – at least until now. The picture in her memory is mixed up with all the others, distorted down a decade of remembrance and nightmares. She wonders how it would compare against the man tending his figs, who she lays beside in conversation with the myth and monster both.

“So the commission wasn’t from you?” she thinks she teases.

“He… arranged to meet me once,” he relates a little reluctantly; this was surely past even before the things they’d talked about. “Talked nonsense and scribbled away until I realised he was wasting my time and left.” He pauses in recollection, dusting off memories that he might have been mistaken in thinking he’d have no further need for. “I should’ve made him burn that sketch book,” he concludes in a low-key threatening drawl.

“Notoriety clearly didn’t trouble you,” she points out aloofly.

“I was good enough at the job,” he counters, then with a far more ominous undercurrent adds, “and if I didn't want to be seen, you wouldn't notice me in a room standing right next to you.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” she says, by now so attuned to his presence that every move he makes reverberates like they're walking on piano strings.

“Maybe not here,” he concedes. “In a city things would be different.”

“How so?” She slumps from leaning on a hand to an elbow, sidelong to the dusty ground.

“More people,” he answers shortly.

“What sense does that make?” she challenges, picking her head back up. “You just said that drawing attention from the masses begets the end of a career.” Bar his, of course, which could only be halted by murdering her mother and kidnapping her.

“They’re different things,” he says. “An oblivious mob is the best cover any assassin could ask for.”

“Doesn't that make my training inevitably incomplete?” she poses, gesturing at the unoccupied lands around them.

“There are plenty of things for you to worry about before then,” he schools, carrying on with his work uncompromised by the lecture he is slowly infuriating her with. “Though if you really want to understand how an assassin operates,” he adds with hands slowing as the thought comes over him, and she feels something wary about him that makes her wait with bated breath, “you could learn the trade.”

Insects chirping in the distance are the only thing to be heard for a moment.

“The trade?” she scathes. “Of murder?”

“It’s a job requiring a specific set of skills,” he counters with an edge to match hers; they're still sparring – though with less throwing things – as he stiffly adds, “and exists as long as people are prepared to pay for it.”

“Yes, yes,” she defers with flutter of her hand. “Assassins are mere tools and society the true villain.” It’s not a conversation she’s keen to revisit at present, and seizes instead on the more
“Interesting proposal. “Are you saying you’ll train me as one?”

“Offering,” he says calmly. “I had a… programme that might be useful knowing.”

“Programme?” she echoes critically. “I thought you weren't a schoolmaster.”

“Not yours,” he specifies. “It was necessary at the time – mostly drills in combat and stealth.”

“I don't need drills,” she insists. Certainly not in this weather.

“That's not the point,” he dismisses. “It's so you know what someone trained by me does.”

“You’re rather confident this is still relevant,” she remarks a little cattily. “Things change.”

“As long as the boys I trained are still out there, you've got something to gain from knowing what they do,” he counters, and she knows the Whalers are still out there – closer than comfort sometimes.

“How many?” she dares to ask; for how long did he refine humans into ever-sharper weapons? He gives her a displeased look, and she remembers that there’s still a man in there who shoved her against a wall and held her there until she was beaten, just behind the show of composure.

“I’d have to check my records,” he answers in a recalcitrant rasp.

“Approximately,” she angles, sparing a brief thought to what he means by records.

“A few dozen,” he mumbles. “Maybe.” It’s a pointless exercise essentially, because she knows the men who used to work for him are still forces to be reckoned with in her city, and there’s sense in what he’s offering – but it doesn’t make her any less reluctant to accept it.

“So you want to teach me the same skills you used to kill my mother?” she puts to him, and his hands, busy until now, still.

“It was an offer,” he says with words placed as carefully as foundation stones. “I understand if you're not interested.”

“Oh, I'm interested,” she counters, the vitriol that she threw at him dying like a flash in the pan. The power of feeling like she holds him in her palm – dictating his reactions with her own – is so gratifying it overwhelms everything else. “I just wanted to be sure we address it for what it is.”

He gives her a searching look that she returns with a hardened one of her own.

“You like doing that, don't you?” he remarks as he finally turns back to his work, claiming an air of lightheartedness that she’s no reason to trust whatsoever.

“Doing what?” she feigns.

“Pushing me,” he supplies, and she didn’t expect his words to be so precise – even if they are accurate.

“Can you blame me?” she retorts, keeping the game up rather than letting things drop into sincerity, which were known to be dangerous waters.

“I’m not accustomed to it,” he remarks with quiet foreboding. She wonders what happened to other people who liked making hopscotch out of his boundaries, but if there’s one thing she’s wants to make clear to him, it's that she gets to be the exception.
“Well, Daud,” she announces with bravado, getting up and dusting herself off as she fixes him with a look that she could count among her victories. “I fail to see why that’s any concern of mine.”

He meets her gaze with his perpetual flat expression, but her instincts won’t settle, so she keeps her reflexes sharp. No sooner has she looked away than he slips through the void to his holiday home in her blind spot. She hasn’t time to turn around, but settles for throwing her hands behind her head to grab his wrists just before he catches her.

“Predictable,” she critiques, but rather than backing out he stays where he is, holding their pose like the powers that push them apart could also hold them together.

“I might push back,” he murmurs with hands half-open on either side of her neck, and the vibrations of his voice run right through her.

“I think I can handle it,” she replies full of bluff, turning over her shoulder only to be surprised by how close his face is to hers – not that she lets it show. “Don’t you?”

She’s testing him, and he’s not blind enough not to know it.

There’s an unusual familiarity in having her hands on him that has slipped in on an undercurrent, something in the way she can touch him that has shifted without showing the slightest physical indication, but it is tangible for all of a moment before he pulls his wrists out of her grasp and steps away.

“Then we’ll start tomorrow,” he settles, and the distance between them has turned into a canyon.

That night Emily sleeps on familiar nightmares, but occupies neither her young self’s shoes nor her mother’s. On this occasion it’s Daud’s.

Her – his, or their hands follow predetermined paths through the same tragedy, her own childish cries as she’s bundled away and her mother dies one more time to the same senseless greed. Greed that has in no way retired, even if the assassin has.

She wakes too hot and struggling for breath, a memory of murdering her mother viscerally fresh in her mind, and wonders exactly what she’s getting herself into.
The Fifteenth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily wonders if this is really a good idea, and knows she’s going to do it anyway.

Chapter Notes

HAPPY DISHONORED 2 RELEASE EVERYONE!!!

While all fan works are just that, I'd be a liar to say I'm not hoping that the new game doesn't create too many glaring inconsistencies with this story, so fingers crossed for that. All this *does* take place a couple of years before the new game, and already bends some of the things we knew about DH2 (like it being Emily's first time 'out' of Dunwall) but I'm enough of a sucker for this pairing that I'll make it as canon-compatible as I can, though at the end of the day it's all in good fun.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emily emerges from the house on the first day of her new training to find Daud stood in the middle of the patio, dappled by the sunlight through the terrace, with his arms crossed uncompromisingly over his chest and a face cut from stone.

“There’s something we should get straight before any of this starts,” he announces bluntly, not moving so much as a whisker from his pose. “I’m not training you as an assassin.”

She gives him a puzzled look and remarks, “In which case, this seems like a strange means to such ends.”

“It’s so you know what someone I trained does,” he replies stiffly. “Exactly what they know.”

“I assume you’re working towards a point,” she invites with a querying wave of her fingers.

“That you should learn the programme the way others have before you,” he continues, “not how best you think it should be,” he delivers, leaning on the purposefully cultivated calm that she’s learned not to trust.

“I’m still waiting on that point,” she remarks icily, like he’s a clerk who can’t shuffle the right paper in front of her.

“It means I can’t be so accommodating anymore,” he summarises with absolute – incredible, even – sincerity, and her mouth actually drops open for a moment.

“Accommodating?” she echoes in disbelief.

“Right,” he says, a shadow of a smirk threatening the corner of his mouth.

“Anymore?”
He cuts to the point. “Do we have an understanding?”

“Forgive me a moment,” she says, oozing insincerity. “Are you suggesting that everything I’ve experienced before now has been your hospitality?”

“This is exactly what I’m talking about,” he counters. “If I get an earful from you every time you take issue with my methods then this is going to take a long time.”

It’s an ineffective threat, because time is slowly but surely becoming irrelevant as she loses grip on the shackles of days and dates. There was never really a discussion with her father about how long she was going to be away – as long as it took, she assumed – and that world feels so distant from here.

So although she sees his point perfectly well, making concessions to him is against the natural order, and she much prefers watching him bend.

“If this purportedly valuable training consists largely of drills, I doubt I’m going to have much trouble with it,” she drags out. “So rather than discussing around the point, might I suggest we simply get on with it?”

“No,” he retorts, arms still crossed in a shirt that wasn’t quite the right size somehow, stretching across his shoulders like the seams might give. “Attitude gets you out on your ass in my programme, and your highness is no exception.” There’s a barbed current to his tone that's almost cheeky, which seems to have come from some formerly undiscovered corner of his personality. She wonders if this is what he used to be like with his real… students, she hesitates to consider.

“What do you want from me, then?” she shoots, starting to verge on frustration. “All you’ve done is talk about what you don’t want me to do.”

“Just do as I say,” he returns tersely. “Without a spectacle.” She hates that she knows what he means, weighing up the obvious bait against how much she really wants to go through with this training – and what would happen if she refuses.

If they hit a wall and she stops progressing, it followed that she might as well leave. While she knows that ought to be exactly what she wants, the thought of ending this… whatever it was, is somehow worse than giving in to him.

“Fine,” she sighs, suffixing, “With regards to this training only.”

“You can do better than that,” he demands, stepping forward and catching a beam of sunlight that lights a streak of silver in his hair. She starts to consider if maybe he has been accommodating, if this is the alternative.

“Is it that important I prostrate myself to you?” she accuses. “I, Emily Kaldwin, First of my Name, accept the terms of your proposal regarding my training programme to not be an assassin, and in doing so will adhere to the behaviour of a faithful lackey without issuing challenge to your pedagogy.” She stares him out as he picks apart the shotgun of jargon, and can’t resist a parting shot. “Satisfactory?”

There’s a part of her that hates how he returns her glare with a steady, composed look that tells her he’s not at all concerned with her flash.

“Yes Daud, is fine,” he responds, and the thought of saying any such thing to him makes her more inclined to starting a fight than taking a lesson from him – though she reckons she can do both. “Let’s start with push-ups,” he continues.
She meets his gaze head on, her eyebrows making for her hairline. “Push-ups?”

“Ten,” he names adamantly. “To start.”

“That’s all?”

“Are you going to do it or not?” he snaps. “Otherwise you’re wasting my time.”

“Fine, fine,” she dismisses, but rather than deliver exactly what he requests – she can’t make it *that* easy for him – kicks into a handstand, and with careful balance and no more than a few wobbles delivers his ten push-ups on her hands alone.

He lets her finish them, right herself and cross her arms at him in expectation of the next task when he opens his mouth to tell her with a perfect deadpan, “I said push-ups.”

“I gave you push-ups,” she counters.

“Is that so?” he retorts with about as much incredulity as her subversion deserves, and wanders over to the hammock.

“Where are you going?” she asks while he climbs into it seemingly at his own leisure. “What’s next?”

“Next?” he queries lazily. “You haven’t done what I asked yet.” She rolls her eyes but he’s too busy sling himself into the hammock in a way that looks deceptively easy. “Keep fooling by all means,” he remarks, swaying from side to side with a nonchalance that she’d be a fool to think is honest. “We’ve got all day.”

“Ughh,” she huffs in a show of borderline melodrama that she knows she wouldn’t get away with in civilised company, and practically throws herself to the ground to perform the ten wretched push-ups.

He watches her without getting up, offering a brief, insidiously authorative, “Good,” when she’s finished. She’s no doubt about whether he’s enjoying this. “Now give me the same ten and clap your hands between each.”

She stares at him like she might try and stab him (again) given the chance, but the look he returns from the clutches of the hammock is distinctly uninterested – they both know what’s likely to happen if she tries.

“Fine,” she spits venom, arms burning and slightly regretting her decision to try and get the better of him by over-performing in this heat.

“If you give me one more of those *fines*, then you owe me another ten,” he delivers boredly, expressing only when he mimics a snippy falsetto of her voice.


“Because I say so,” he replies obstinately, and she’d kick him so hard in that hammock he spins all the way around if she didn’t know any better; it’s unfortunate that she does. “So what’s it going to be?” he puts to her. “You want to keep arguing the toss, or do this the easy way?”

*Easy for you,* she’d hiss if she was going to keep arguing, but that won’t get them anywhere except into a fight – or worse yet, Daud would give up and she’d be stuck with nothing to do. She knows what he expects of her - which she technically agreed to - and subverting his expectations is a close
second to outright disagreeing with him.

“Yes Daud,” she delivers with unequivocal obedience, so clearly surprising him she can read it off his face like words on a page.

He stops swinging, sitting up to watch her get back down for another ten push-ups, jumping off the ground to clap her hands as she rises and sinks back down. It’s the kind of mindless exercise she did years ago, when she was still a novice and hadn’t had a sword in her hand for the larger part of her life.

There were too many concessions to her crown to count in over a decade on the throne, but something she had absolutely refused to budge on was the proportion of her time spent on martial arts training – an area in which she fortunately maintains her father’s full support. It was and remains the place she can retreat to, where things were simple and every fight had a winner or loser; singularly, thankfully uncomplicated.

Daud gets up and walks over to one of the vine-wrapped pillars of the trellis, pulling out a handful of sun-dried flowers which have faded from pink to a scorched orange. As she finishes the final push-up, he comes to stand in front of her and crouches down, holding out the wilted posy.

“Again,” he says like striking an anvil; she can tell he’s judging her by her reactions, and doesn’t throw the fit of exasperation she’s otherwise tempted to, “and grab something.”

She’s rolling in sweat and her arms are fast turning to iron, but to hell if she’ll let him break her on the first day, so she pushes herself up from the ground and snatches a dried flower from his hand. Quick hands for hidden knives, she thinks as she does it a second time.

“And the left,” he instructs in a way that’s so muted she realises it’s as good as she’s likely to get for a compliment, and she performs as expected, alternating each hand until she relieves him of his burden. She finishes and slumps to her knees, wiping a cascade of sweat off her face.

“Good,” he says shortly, and at some point she would’ve wanted to punch him far more than she does this time, which is only moderately. “Get some water and cool off.” He pauses as he stands up, and then adds, “Wouldn’t want to lose you again.”

There’s an awkward kick in her stomach, and a memory of being held that makes her skin prickle.

“I’m fine,” she states.

“I didn’t ask,” he retorts coldly. “I said get some water.”

She stares him out, realising they have circled back around to this place yet again, and it’ll be an exhausting journey if she contests each waystone along the way.

So she offers a deceptively obedient, “Yes Daud,” and trots off like it’s really that easy, even – especially – when it’s not.

Succumbing to temptation, she looks back once and finds herself at the heart of one of his implacable stares, as he stands framed by the trellis in a white shirt and trousers against the dusky brown palette of the landscape. She wonders what he makes of her; perpetually unkempt and a sure source of frustration – but nothing that should result in the indecipherable expression on his face.
“So who did you teach this infamous ‘programme’ too?” Emily questions, walking a few paces behind Daud through the shade of trees; he prunes bushes while reciting drills that she’s expected to perform at least once – or as many times as he asks – to understand the forge that cast people who still kill today.

“Whalers,” he answers like she didn’t already know that.

“What kind of people were they?” she presses, knowing they still are but finding the past tense more appropriate for the context; he doesn’t seem too disposed to remembering. “Why this need for discipline?”

“My boys weren’t exactly polished society, highness,” he says it more like a nickname than a title, but she’s not bothered by it enough to retaliate.

“Where were they from?”

“Here and there,” he answers unhelpfully, but catching himself on one of her wry looks concedes to elaborate. “There’s always kids trying to claw their way out of the gutter any way they know how.” He pauses to do something with a bush that frustrates her in a way she could swear was deliberate before continuing, “All wanting the same thing.” He trails off again, quiet rustling at his fingertips taking over from raw tones.

“Which is?” she prompts impatiently, and he looks over from where he works, framed by branches and leaves like he’s become a part of this landscape that so defines him.

“A better life,” he finishes absent-mindedly, then returns to his gardening.

“… A life of murder shouldn’t be the best option someone has,” she comments as she works the statement over as thoroughly as he does the branches between his fingers.

“It’s a hard world,” he remarks with a shrug. “Especially in Dunwall.” Her city was scarred, that much she knew; a legacy of inequality and violence had torn apart the capital in a way she was still struggling to mend. It was too easy for people to fall through the cracks and be lost forever – herself included, as she tightrope walks her way through each year unsure if it’d be her last.

But Daud was here to equip her for that, and for a moment – as they return to yet more blasted drills – she acknowledges something like appreciation for this new link in her armour.

“These… whalers were happy to make a living off murder?” she continues a little later, like her curiosity is being distilled by the ever-intensifying sun in which they go about their respective tasks.

“Some were proud of it,” he seems to defend, bristling in a way she can tell is getting close to a nerve. “Gave them an identity that was respected as well as feared.”

“Identity?” she poses cynically. “To what – one day be the Knife of Dunwall?” A look flashes across his face that she could’ve missed were she not looking right at him, gauging his reactions every time she pushes further.

“… For some,” he answers begrudgingly. “To others it was a way to stay alive and get paid enough to fund their vices.” She somehow likes that picture better.
“Why didn’t they leave?” she pursues; why would anyone continue making the decision to continue killing for a living after getting paid for it once.

“Never asked,” he replies a shade bluntly. “If it’s really so difficult for you to contemplate the ethics of killing for a wage, I’d suggest conversing with soldiers.”

“That’s different,” she argues. “They’re fighting for a cause.”

“You can drop the rhetoric,” he returns snappishly, looking up at her with new focus. “The man with his boots on the ground has no quarrel with the one he’s told to kill, and more often than not follows orders before knowing why.”

“It’s more complex than that,” she contests. “Wars are part of a greater scheme.”

“The hobbies of elites,” he disparages. “Perhaps you’ve not fought an unjust war yet,” he continues, and she’s never been more resolved to defy him without the ability to prove it, “but I have.”

“You can’t expect me to drop my standards just because I’ve been around longer than you,” he continues, looking up at her with a new focus. “The man with his boots on the ground has no quarrel with the one he’s told to kill, and more often than not follows orders before knowing why.”

“Exactly,” he counters tersely. “I’ve been around longer than you, and known plenty of soldiers.”

“Which makes you an expert on warfare and politics, naturally,” she baits.

“At least I’ve seen it,” he shoots at her accusingly. “Maybe some believe in the ideals at first, but when the bodies pile up all the fine chatter that’s supposed to justify slaughter starts losing its meaning, and it’s a job like any other.” He twists on the hook she’s so firmly got him on, continuing to spill like he’s gutting himself. “I preferred having no lies told to me about why I had to kill.” He returns to tending his crop with a sullen frown.

“So what?” she queries spitefully. “Money talks louder than morals?” She shouldn’t be so surprised that he has a developed position on the ethics of his former profession, even after leaving it, but it leaves a bitter taste in her mouth all the same.

“Hm,” he murmurs just affirmatively enough to escape ambiguity.

She can’t bear the possibility that he could think he’s won, so twists the knife that she may be distracted enough to forget from time to time, but is always going to be there.

“I suppose you must be right,” she sets up her snare with careful fingers. “After all, it told you to kill my mother.”

He stills behind his work, mouth wound so tightly shut it could spring at any moment – and she’d be a liar to pretend they’re not her fingers on the mechanism.

There’s a moment where she wonders if maybe she’s pushed him too far – if at some point, one of her jabs would be the last – but it’s not a real deterrent. At least he’d be showing some emotion, and she’s fairly sure he wouldn’t hurt her, not out of anger.

When he does speak it’s to lay a calm hand on the handle of the knife and turn it back the other way. The wound they share was cut by him, all those years ago, but she knows by now it bleeds them both.
“That’s why I left.”

Chapter End Notes

Ahaha... this is a good chapter for me (mostly because it's the first 'Yes Daud' and I'm weakkk) and marks a transition into what I am fairly sure is the middle 3rd of this story. Probably. Maybe?

Many thanks to all the kind readers and commenters who've come aboard this glorious trash ship, this pairing slays me 24/7 so there's no greater satisfaction than seeing it do the same to others. Writing is its own reward, but posting chapters and finding out what bits and pieces made everyone laugh or squeal is definitely what makes fanfiction uniquely fun.
The Sixteenth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily didn’t come here to have Daud hold back on her – any weakness he left could be taken advantage of by someone else, and furthermore, she can’t get a grip on who he really is while he’s still got restraint.

Chapter Notes

So... I know I said last chapter is a good one for me, but this might *also* be one of my favourite chapters to date, and is a touch longer than the average wordcount (I aim for something between 2.3-3k) so I hope y'all will see why. Enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On the second morning of Daud’s infamous programme, Emily emerges from the house to find a training dummy set up on the terrace, which has been miraculously cleared of harvest overnight. She’s no idea where he’s storing such a mass of fruit and vegetables, but is more interested in the bucket-headed scarecrow that stands at the end of the patio dressed in a bloodied shirt – the one she stabbed him in, if she’s not mistaken.

Even more interesting are the swords that rest like rails over the outside table; lightweight sabres, not quite practice blades, going by the quality and weight of the metal as she lifts one.

“You’re entrusting me with a sword?” she queries sarcastically as he walks up from the direction of the garden, spinning one of the blades around her hand and warming up to the feel of it in the air. Wonders where they came from, if he left Dunwall with only what he could carry.

“It’s not me you’ll be pointing it at,” he counters, putting a hand to the tip of her blade to guide it away from himself as he moves past her. “Let’s keep it that way.”

He takes up the other blade and falls into a familiar stance. There is an unsettling completeness to the look of the weapon in his hand, and she has a horrible thought that either of these swords could be the one he used to kill her mother, before deciding he’s unlikely to have any fondness for keeping the artefact around either.

“After me.” He begins instruction, stalking the dummy in an inadvertently amusing way and running it through from behind with a simple stab. He straightens up and stands there motionless for a while before she realises that he’s done.

“That’s all?” she queries. “You know very well I can do that.”

“Then show me,” he insists, standing with his sword in his hand like an extension of his arm, weightless as he gestures for her to make the crossing across the ad-hoc practice yard. She plods over to the dummy and drives the blade through its grass-stuffed shirt with mechanical replication, but after the first few rounds it becomes excessively boring and she ends up with Daud’s clicking
tongue scolding her for embellishment.

“These are drills,” he chides, “not a showcase.”

“They’re beneath me,” she spits, breaking the seal of tolerance that keeps only as long as he also bites his tongue. “I could do this in my sleep.”

“Beneath you?” he echoes with something like amusement. “I’ll skip ahead.” Lifting his blade, he stands behind the dummy and then with careful steps across himself turns a full circle around the target with a series of lightning-strike cuts that she can barely follow.

“That’s more like it,” she says confidently, approaching the dummy to repeat the sequence. He’s finally challenging her with something worth her time, and she’s almost finished when he swipes his blade against hers mid-swing and stops her where she stands.

“Wrong,” he delivers with unbearable self-satisfaction, and then with a tilt of his head, “Do you need to see it again?”

“No,” she snaps, cursing herself that she’d be so foolish to think he wouldn’t notice her cutting corners, and sets about the task again – and again – until his keen eyes are met.

To take a break shouldn’t be a relief but Emily’s muscles are burning from the static start-and-stop drilling – trained by her father in the realities of fighting before she ever bothered to strike a dummy – so when Daud suggests a moment of rest she’s body over mind about whether to take it.

She sits with her back to the cool stone of the house, draining a large jug of water flavoured with some kind of citrus she’s not familiar with and grazing on food that he brings out from the kitchen without needing to make anything of it with words. She knows it goes without saying that he’s taking care of her the way a host should, although she probably makes for an outrageously ungrateful guest.

“Can’t we just spar?” she asks him as she gets laboriously back to her feet, summoned by a subtle bob of his head that she processes well after she’s started responding to it.

She’s fed up of unimaginative drills; cut the most direct route to the target, in and out as quickly as possible, same as she learned when she was a child and not an experienced duellist. The only thing he pulls her up on is the angles of her gutting thrusts into the straw entrails of their target, in spite of the fact that he isn’t teaching them to her so she can replicate any such practice – technically, at least.

“When you’ve mastered the basics,” he answers unyieldingly.

“Basics?” she scoffs with an arch of her eyebrows, and whirls her sword around her in a basic control exercise that increases in speed until it’s little more than a flash of light that dances around her. She flicks a wrist up and cuts a dangling stem of flowers from the roof of the trellis, slicing it in half as it falls to the ground and grabbing one of the pieces in her free hand. “I’m confident I have them down,” she concludes, holding the cluster of dried flowers out at him, then tossing it when he stays stoic as a statue.

“Flash is useless to an assassin,” he remarks, “so if that’s supposed to impress me, try again.”

“I could beat you, I don’t need to impress you,” she asserts calmly, but as always he seems to find
her confidence funny, giving a chuckle as he spins his sabre from one hand to the other in a way that is undoubtedly a statement against her own demonstration. For a moment she can’t remember if he’s right or left handed, and catches herself in the act of needing to know, definitively.

“If I’m not mistaken, you already lost to me once,” he points out in a way that’s too contrary to be immune, and the allure of baiting him out of his decade-aged shell beckons.

“Unarmed,” she specifies – and tipsy, though that wasn’t worth mentioning. “Had I my sword the outcome would’ve been different.” They share a look that she can’t quite interpret, which he breaks first by looking back to the dummy.

“This isn’t part of the programme,” he says frostily.

“So?” she tempts, cutting arcing swings with her sword that make her miss the reach and familiarity of the custom-forged rapier hidden away in her room. “Aren’t you curious?”

“… About?” he foolishly responds, and she’s never been surer to have him on her line.

“Which of us is the better swordsman,” she answers, and Daud sighs as he runs a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair like she’s the one pushing his receding hairline back day by day.

“Focus on the training,” he says wearily, and starts another drill only for her to step up and cut between him and the target – sparing the dummy’s life – and giving him cause to parry her with the ruthless efficiency she knows he keeps in reserve. “I told you not to point that at me,” he warns with a gurgle in his throat like a storm drain.

“I recall,” she remarks, pacing around him with a challenging grin steps until they’re face to face, blades scraping threateningly over one another. “What are you going to do about it?”

He gives her another implacable look before suddenly moving to strike at her – she has gotten to him – and she parries but the bout is cut short when he stops himself like he’s his own chaperone.

“Are you always this obstinate?” he spits in a way that reminds her of his warnings – not so accommodating anymore.

“Are you?” she turns back on him, and then after a few moments of assessing the glare he sends out through eyes framed with crows’ feet, she lunges forward to strike.

He parries without hesitation, and before long they’re locked into a long chain of clashes. She asserted so confidently that she could beat him, but he’s fast and knows these blades like his own hand, disciplined over however-many years in wielding a sword to deadly intention.

Though not quite as good as her father – which went without saying – she’s been sparing with Corvo all her life, and the difference in Daud’s style makes him harder to predict. A sudden movement one way when she expects him to go the other leaves her vulnerable, and the edge of his blade arrives neatly across her chest.

She calmly meets his eyes, trying to rival his infamous poker face as she suggests, “Best of three?”

He snorts, but when she shoves away his blade and comes at him again, he counters and fights through. For all his insistence on sticking to the book, she’s tempted him into something that’s not the programme or a lesson, promising nothing more than the thrill of combat.

She soon realises that for all his emphasis on the cleanest line to the target, the more elaborate her strikes become the slower he is to defend them. With whiplike reflexes her blade finally moves
quicker than he does, and she lands the flat of her sword – edge turned away at the last second – to rest alongside his neck.

“I can give you a few suggestions, if you like,” she offers saccharinely, but he returns a scathing laugh. He’s been wielding swords since before she was born, and rather than being provoked by her arrogance seems to find it entertaining.

“We’re not done yet,” he returns as he throws down for the tiebreaker, coming back on form and driving her all the way around the terrace and back again before either of them gets a hit.

Unfortunately, he’s the one who turns into her unexpectedly during a parry, lunging through her guard and stopping with the tip of his sword poised at the bottom of her ribcage. If this wasn’t a game, she knows the drills he’s been showing her all afternoon – those up-close cuts with distinct angles – would likely drive that blade straight through her heart.

The thought takes her breath away for a moment, but she settles into a cold stare and lobbies, “Out of five?”

“You can’t change the rules until you win,” he remarks with a despairing shake of his head, putting down his weapon in unspoken conclusion.

“I actually said that I could beat you with my sword,” she points out. “So really, it was never as proscribed to begin with.” He gives her narrow look, but she screws up her eyes and gives him a disapproving grimace of her own. “You ought to let me get it if we’re really going to get to the bottom of this,” she continues like the deal is already won. He’s far from the first person to have stood against her getting her own way, and this is something she already knows she can get him to yield to her on.

“There’s no end to chasing your pride like a dog after its tail,” he lectures, becoming insufferably studious as the irregular mosaic of the patio seems of sudden intense interest to him. “Kill the ego,” he murmurs at the floor. “That’s your next lesson.”

“I don’t need a lesson if I know my own ability,” she counters defiantly. “I said I can beat you and I meant it.” She takes a step towards him, leaving the sabre she doesn’t want hanging idly between her fingers. “In fact, I’m willing to prove it.” They hold a stare that’s a battleground for their wills, but for all she’s been learning of his tactics, she’s no certainty which way he’ll pull.

“Show me today’s drills,” he issues like a judge. “All of them. If you’ve got that,” he pauses for just a moment, wetting his lips with his tongue, “then get your sword.”

She grins ear to ear at first, which she soon tames into a composite smug and grateful smirk.

“Yes Daud,” she offers, like the theatre of his being in charge is any more than that. Half the drills are so easily recalled that she reels through them like a single timed sequence, but stutters to an ugly halt when she gets stuck – refuses help that’s offered only as a trap – and finally, agonisingly staggers through the rest, concluding with an exasperated, “Satisfied?”

“Hm,” he gives the affirmative grunt that indicates she has finally met his elusive standards, and then murmurs in a tone so thick it could formally constitute a swamp, “Was this supposed to be about my satisfaction?”

It makes her wonder just what that would be, and memories of them in a handful of… compromising situations jump into the forefront of her mind. She inevitably finds herself returning to the question of where Daud is on the scale of why certain things – like getting the wrong kind of
close – bother him.

She’s used to her appearance affecting people, but for all the courtly talk of beauty she knows that to many it’s her resemblance to her mother that makes them uneasy – it’s a way she likes to get a measure of someone. What she can’t divine from Daud is whether it’s being close to the embodiment of a ghost that makes him break from the façade of indifference he puts up, or something else entirely.

Clever inferences had disguised some of the matter, and although she’d once thought it was the haunting resemblance that made him so guarded, something wasn’t adding up. Not liking it wasn’t the problem, and she’s still working out what it is, without any conjecture or hidden self-restraint. Fighting is her preferred way of getting him to drop his guard, but he entertains her only as long as she played by the rules.

“I’ll get my sword,” she delivers across the terrace, and he gives her a look that weighs more than lead before breaking away to stare out over the hills. He’s neglecting work around the grounds, and she knows he wouldn’t be unjustified in abandoning this contest she’s determined to win – yet all he offers her is a resigned reminder.

“This isn’t in the programme.”

“I know,” she says with a proud smirk, and promptly has no idea what to make when she catches a flash of a grin coming back at her.

She’s seen him smile enough times by now – the disconcerting look of happiness on a face that has a right to be everything from wretched up to rotting six feet underground – but to have teased a smile out of him by igniting something genuinely amiable scares her more than she’d like to admit.

She does the only thing she can and walks away, heading into the house with heat in her cheeks.

Emily’s rapier – forged specifically for her hand, with metals that Piero described as ‘truly fascinating’ – is right where she stored it after accepting Daud’s ban on blades. It feels as natural in her hand as it always has, swaying organically with her footsteps as she walks back out onto the terrace where he is… nowhere to be seen.

By now, she naturally knows better than to proceed with anything except the utmost caution, taking careful steps foot-over-ankle in sweeping circular turns as she moves further into view, waiting for him to attack. The inevitable flash of metal that would otherwise have heralded her demise comes from one side, yet her sword rings victorious when she blocks him as soon as he appears. It’s the first note of a song she’s played many times.

“You’ll have to be faster than that,” she delivers in a honeyed tone that’s not-too-distant from his own lecturing drawl, meeting his eyes as she pushes him back and goes for a strike.

He doesn’t reply – doesn’t have time to – as he parries and regains his footing. Fighting with his commonplace sabres just warmed her up, and she returns to her element like second nature, flexing her blade with several inches of reach he doesn’t have on his shorter one.

He meets her blow for blow, but they are her blows, and she cuts off his strikes and parries without forgiveness. It’s only a matter of time before she threads her sword through his guard like the eye of a needle, pressing the point of her blade into the yielding flesh of his collar – just light enough to avoid drawing blood.
The look he gives her up the length of her blade could rank among her fondest memories there – if she could admit to having any in the first place – but the flash of surprise that dances over his face is soon gone, turning into the composed front that he wants her to think is really him; maybe he does too.

He steps back, rubbing the point of her victory with his thumb, and with a glint in his eye that’s almost mischievous – it isn’t quite mean enough to be petty – turns her own gerrymandering back on her.

“Best of three.”

Chapter End Notes

Ha! I guess this is sort of a cliffhanger?? I just literally couldn’t fit the entirety of this scene into one chapter, so tune in next week to find out who wins, who do you think is going to come out on top? (pun intended heh heh).

I planned this scene for a long time and did a bunch of research on historical medieval fencing due to my endless quest for things being *correct*, and the difference between rapiers and sabres (in a nutshell/for these purposes) is that rapiers are typically longer (but still one-handed) and are designed for thrusting/stabbing, whereas sabres are for cutting/slicing. Daud makes the tool work for the job naturally, but the swords in Dishonored are generally sabres (which makes sense as they’re classic military swords).

My favourite source was a chap called scholagladiatoria on youtube, who has some great videos on historical types of swords, and also how different swords work against each other - rapiers are strong in 1v1s, and are more closely connected to the established concepts of 'dueling' with rules (and what has become modern fencing) than sabres, so at the pre-DH2 release times when I was thinking about these things, the concept of Emily as having a fancy duelling sword was entirely too appealing a picture to resist.

To drop a couple of cheeky reference links, here’s a couple of people sparring a sabre vs a rapier (https://youtu.be/814yO_8B97M) and also the sword-spinning techniques that her royal showoff uses (https://youtu.be/i9dLxDNtV7o).

That's probably more than enough nerdy information for an update, but as always many smooshes to the readers and commenters. There are so many stupid little things that I write in thinking no one will notice and someone *always* picks up on them, and knowing that y’all are being ruined the way this ship has ruined me is truly the greatest satisfaction of them all.

... for those who’ve noted the 'eventual smut' tag has gone up, or commented that the smut will be *glorious*, I added that tag with good reason and OH IT WILL... eventually...
The Seventeenth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Everything, even winning, comes at a cost.

Chapter Notes

So the more DH2 I play the more bits and pieces of inaccuracy it throws my way - the latest blow being the entry in Emily's diary about Callista being her 'old governess' and leaving Dunwall years ago. She may well be the straw that broke the canon-compatibility camel's back, because *blows whistle* that's it, we're going canon-divergent.

All that really means is that the events of this story take place in a timeline/world that's not exactly the same as the one DH2 takes place in, but the nice thing about Dishonored games is all the different options and outcomes, so while this story will hold as true to the canon as I can, there's going to be a few areas where it won't quite match up. E.g. in this trash-ship!verse, Callista remains close to Emily and I imagine her as a silver-haired, iron-ruling head of staff in the tower. There'll be a few more things that I may mention as they come up, but this *does* also pose the question of how Daud could be involved in the events of DH2 in this moderately-altered universe... I have some... ideas...

Anyway, that's probably enough rambling, enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emily stands across from Daud one point up in the duel that she’d wanted so much, but the way he paces around her leaves no doubt about his commitment to snatching victory. His expression is fixed as usual, but the air is thick with predation, and she takes careful steps to mirror his, waiting for one of them to break first.

He blinks towards her and arrives not behind but in front, coming at her faster than he thinks she's used to – forgetting who trained her, again – and rings his sword emptily against hers.

"You won’t get to me like that,” she schools, stepping back to cushion the force of his blow and revelling in the comfort she has against him in combat – for once. “Are you sure you’re not holding back?”

“You like tempting fate, don’t you?” he says out one side of his mouth, the other twisting into a smirk as he raises his mark and vanishes from in front of her.

She can’t see him reappear, which means she knows exactly where he is, and twists just fast enough to avoid a slice that comes from behind, wheeling away from him and meeting the medley of swipes he lobbies at her with relative ease.
“Better than thinking I’m above her,” she retorts, ending a chain of clashes without either of them taking a point. “Run as far into the hills as you like,” she continues to bait as they pace like alley cats around each other, backing away only to start the scrap again. “The real world is still out there, and it remembers you.”

His expression doesn’t shift from its singular focus, but she hopes it’s getting to him. Hiding in the hills didn’t stop her being an Empress, the commitments she’s left behind bubbling like a pot waiting to boil over, and it certainly didn’t stop Daud being who he was – is.

“If you’re trying to provoke me, highness,” he remarks, latching on the familiarity as he steps backwards, resetting their places to go again – and again, until one of them wins, “try harder.”

Her self-control falls short and she launches at him with a surge of vindictive energy, realising her mistake when she overextends and almost drives herself into the edge of his blade. His free hand rushes to her shoulder and she jolts uncomfortably against him, breath punched out of her chest as he becomes the only thing that keeps his sword from cutting straight through her chest. Yet he is a sure presence, keeping her from harm even as he lures her into giving away the point.

“That makes us even,” he delivers, cementing her as the victim of her own folly. “Get into your opponent’s head by all means, but don’t leave the door open,” he lectures, and she huffs as she pushes away from him, shaken by the thought that she almost cut herself in half in her eagerness to beat him. Her father would be having fits.

“There’s still one more round,” she reminds him as she returns to stance; this is one area where she’s no need for his lessons – or so she has to prove – and dives into the next flurry, which ends without either of them scoring a point again.

They go back and try time after time, running through exchanges without either letting through a strike. The unpredictabilities of earlier have been ironed out, and even though she leads the attack, his defence is near-impermeable; this is the mastery that she was sent to learn from him – how to be unkillable – and she’s not too proud to recognise it.

When another round comes and goes without Daud relenting, she realises they’re matched to the point where only a mistake would give either the chance to win, but she’s unlikely to last long enough for that to happen – not in this heat. If she’s any chance at beating him, she needs a change in tactics.

Accepting the price of victory, she launches into the next clash with the outcome already decided. It lasts but a few blows before she makes her final move and grits her teeth against the bite of metal in her flesh.

They both freeze, but even as the edge of Daud’s sword grazes her arm, the point of hers presses against his throat – she can feel his pulse throbbing through the tuning fork of the metal, or maybe hers. She’s forgone sleeves, so the trickle of blood that ekes out of the cut rolls warm down bare skin; her price of victory.

“I win,” she issues defiantly, not letting her weapon fall just yet, though he pulled his own back the moment he broke skin.

“You let yourself be cut,” he accuses crossly, like he resents being undermined in his attempts not to harm her.

“Just a little,” she returns calmly. She lowers her sword and wipes up the trail of blood with a hand, quickly losing it in the dark fabric of her butchered trousers-come-shorts. “See, it’s practically
“It could’ve been worse,” he mutters, removing the traces of her blood from his sword with careful attention – like the metal can’t risk getting a taste.

“Not by much,” she counters surely; even if Daud had succeeded in cutting deeper, the move was calculated and she’d still have secured the win. “The point is mine and you know it.” Looking at him assures her he does.

“This time,” he maintains with an unforgiving air. “You shouldn’t rely on spilling your blood to get what you want,” he issues, and she’s unsure whether it’s a simple warning or the beginning of a lesson.

“Sacrifice is nothing new to me,” she replies with great decorum, spinning her sword like it needs the exercise.

“If you make a habit of letting yourself be pieced away for trivial things, little by little you’ll be hollowed out until there’s nothing left,” he growls in a way that’s tantalisingly personal. She considers how much of him is left, that he has to guard it so carefully.

“Another lesson in being an assassin?” she prompts with just a dash of cynicism, lest they become too friendly – again.

“In any life,” he replies, but derails further argument by stepping forward with a hand for her weapon. “May I?” he asks unexpectedly, and she suspiciously allows her prized weapon to be taken in his labouring fingers. He inspects it like he’s browsing amongst an armoury, turning it over and testing the balance – perfectly weighed, of course – and finally giving it a slow test stroke.

“Not bad,” he says like he’s the judge of anything, but when she reaches to take it back he flees her grasp. “One more round,” he suggests, and his stamina might be the death of her.

“Any time,” she replies with false bravado, holding out her hand impatiently.

“No,” he counters with a tutting click of his tongue, taking the elegant sword through the slowed motions of a lunge. “I’ll keep this.”

“What?” she protests, fingers curling back. “Why?”

“Because it makes you feel safe,” he replies.

“Why does that have to be a bad thing?” she asks without attempting to deny it. ‘But why does she sleep with a sword?’ she’d once overheard someone asking Callista, not thinking of what she’d gone through – why she might want to feel safe.

“You’ll learn more the less comfortable you are,” he diagnoses like damned physician.

“Another prophetic lesson,” she mocks. “You’re full of them today.”

“Am I?” he remarks innocently. “I’ve rather lost count.”

“So much for your infamous programme,” she ridicules.

“This isn’t part of the programme,” he counters rather livelily. “Which, if you want to return to-”

“No,” she interjects reluctantly, taking the sabre he offers her from his own hand. It’s warm in her

stopped already.”
hand, which could be the sun or him – probably both. “I’ll fight.”

“I’ve not known you to do much else,” he quips, setting himself back in position like a piece in a music box.

“Let it be said that this is a cheap tactic to get your own way,” she observes as she takes up her own position, aligning like magnets before the next fray begins.

“Hmm,” he agrees with a grunt. “One of yours.”

She scowls, and would argue bitterly if he weren’t right.

“Be careful with that,” she spits like poison.

“You hurt yourself, not me,” he rushes to defend himself.

“I meant the sword,” she decries patronisingly. “My body heals, but that blade is one-of-a-kind.”

He gives her a mute look that suggests there’s far more he’d say were his lips not sealed by whatever impulse he has to keep things to himself, but she swears she catches a murmur in half an ear as he dashes for her. The sounds are almost lost as she rushes to retaliate, but it makes little sense that he’d be muttering, “like you,” unless he’s doing something as unlikely as paying a compliment.

Her time to consider this is brief as their blades strike up a new warsong, and she has to contest the length advantage of her sword from the receiving end, though Daud wields it with far less familiarity than she does. Even so he’s able to hold her off, jolting from thrust to parry in uneven, reactionary moves. That he’s this formidable on reflex alone – as at ease with anything in his hands as nothing at all – reminds her of what she’s supposed to be aiming for, and with the playing field levelled again a bolt of fear rushes through her every time he drives the point of her rapier towards her and she deflects it by a whisker.

She fights like her life depends on it – remembering another of his lessons – but something goes awry in the middle of an exchange, and her sword is suddenly soaring through the open air towards the olive groves. There is a quiet rustle as it lands, and Emily lets her own sword drop as they both stare in the direction it flew. It is a not inconceivable amount of time until either of them speaks.

“You did that on purpose,” she says bitterly.

“I did not,” he retorts, whipping a harsh look at her. “My hand slipped.”

“You want me to believe you dropped a sword?” she poses.

“It’s too light,” he remarks with such discomfort she might even believe he’s telling the truth.

“Not for me,” she counters, and could take this as an opportunity to wave Daud’s sword in his face and wax about winning by default, but she’s rather more concerned by the fact that he’s just hurled her sword into the trees and is standing there like that’s going to bring it back. “Are you going to get it?” she asks with the flimsiest veil of a question over the demand, and he gives a long sigh.

“It went some way,” he remarks pensively.

“Exactly,” she says, increasingly sardonic as she continues “So… go find it?”

He gives her a worrying look before decreeing, “It’ll show up,” like leaving priceless swords lost in
Serkonian farmlands is something he does with great frequency.

“Daud,” she delivers as an entire sentence, and watches him pare his reaction; subtle enough that she’d miss it with poorer trained eyes, but he’s been the subject of her studies for long enough that she knows that there’s power in his name on her lips.

“I’ll keep an eye out for it while I’m working,” he heaves without disguising his reluctance.

“It was your fault,” she reminds him in case he’s momentarily overlooked it, one last chance to make amends civilly.

“It’s your sword,” he counters carelessly.

“And I told you to be careful with it!” she snaps, lashing out before she can stop herself. She didn’t want him to clock how much it bothers her – not something she needs to worry about anymore. He looks at her with a sun-streaked face under the patchy shade of the terrace, and gives her the worst response possible.

“I’m sorry,” he delivers half-sincerely, and then with a marginally more convincing intonation. “It was an accident.”

He’s one to talk of accidents – she can name a few things that he did quite deliberately that should’ve voided his right to deserve any sympathy – but she knows he’s apologising not because he wants to, but because she does. It’s a victory worth recording.

“Hm,” is her initial reply, arms crossed over her chest to complete the imitation of his lexicon. “Perhaps you should’ve been known as the butter knife of Dunwall.”

He gives a scoff that divides her sensibilities in half, leaving her battling over whether to be pleased or annoyed as he steps into his sandals, dons his hat and shoulders a basket before setting off into the trees.

Emily is starting to think that ‘rapier in an orchard’ could be a new iteration of the proverb about needles and haystacks, because for all her – and Daud’s, though she’s increasingly sure he’s working first and searching second – efforts, her sword is nowhere to be found.

Her attempts to provoke his sense of guilt over the matter haven’t had the impact she was hoping for; met with flat insistences that her weapon will ‘show up’ eventually, to say nothing the quiet assertion that he couldn’t possibly have done it on purpose because he would’ve – one, thrown it much further, and two, known where it landed.

They’re equally incredulous arguments, but a curt reminder that it’s been some ten years since he’d had a weapon in hand, and she could do to give him leeway to be a little ‘rusty’ soon shuts her up on the subject. There were things you simply didn’t forget, but perhaps a decade was enough to fall out of practice. She comes to accept arguing with him won’t bring them any closer to what she wants, and abandons the dispute to concentrate on looking for the weapon herself.

She’s sure he knows he’s being obnoxious – whether it’s deliberate or collateral to the fact that he has things he needs to get on with is up to speculation – but if she has to endure one more reminder that this ‘isn’t in the programme’ it’s likely to drive her to madness.

The heat forces her to take a reluctant break, lest she dally with sunstroke again, so she occupies
the one comfortable spot on the terrace and lays crossly tearing up bread in her lap. Daud comes past with a carrier full of olives and her eyes follow him enviously, tanned complexion protecting him where hers fails her, as he bears the haul up to the table and dumps it with a soft patter.

He slows under observation, turning the barest amount he needs to glance at her; she’d be foolish to assume he doesn’t know when he’s being watched, especially from so obvious a place as the hammock. She almost tipped herself back out on the ground when she first got in, but has since settled into a comfortable lounge that could compare to his own examples.

“Here,” he offers, drawing all the wrong conclusions as he takes a handful of olives and crosses the patio to drop them into her cupped hands. She isn’t really hungry, but it’s easier to let him think that’s what she was so focused on.

“You hid my blade exceedingly well,” she remarks acidly, sitting up with something almost like grace as she bites half an olive away from its stone.

“It’s out there somewhere,” he replies with the tranquillity of still water.

“That is not where I keep my fondest possessions,” she says contritely.

“There’s no one but us to find it,” he points out. “I’ll get around there soon.” She realises he may well be trying to console her, but can’t decide if it’s something she likes or wants.

“I’m supposed to wait for you to bring in enough harvest to find something of mine that you lost?” she poses, and finds it solidly infuriating that he seems to be smirking.

“That may be the case.”

She’s no doubt he finds amusement in her not getting her way, and gnaws on an olive stone like she can roll him between her teeth until he’s stripped to the core – maybe then she’ll actually know who or what he is.

“I’m not sure I can tolerate such a lackadaisical approach,” she comments before spitting the stone clear across the terrace. He lifts an eyebrow at her like he’s appalled or impressed.

“Do you have an alternative?” he puts to her knowing full-well that without his compliance she’s got nothing. She may like pushing him, but he’s one to talk with the kick he seems to get out of drawing lines and watching her rail against them.

“Apparently not,” she derides. “Though I hasten to add, if you help me find it we could return to your beloved programme.”

“I’ve no love for it,” he bites, catching her off-guard with how strong the resistance comes through in his voice. “Keep looking,” he finishes gruffly, and she pops another olive in her mouth and watches him disappear through the trees.

It’s still too hot to go crawling around the dirt for swords she’s sure aren’t there, so after a not insurmountable amount of thrashing, shuffling and flipping like a fish, she succeeds in striking a comfortable pose in the hammock once more – how Daud manages it with such ease still puzzles her, and succumbs to a nap instead.
It was GREAT fun reading people's theories about who was going to win the fight, with a lot of really solid points and theories about who'd come out on top. The way I reasoned it out was that with Daud's swords he'd win because, well, he's Daud... Emily wins with her sword, but cuts it very close (you could say hehe), and the other way around is a 'anything can happen' situation.

The main difference with the swords, as one commenter pointed out, is the style of fighting they call for and basic material differences - Emily's rapier is longer, and they're thrusting rather than slashing swords (one of the videos I linked in the notes of the last chapter is of a sabre/rapier matchup, which is a nice visual example), so Daud is adopting a slightly different style/approach when he fights with her sword.

As for his slippery fingers, our man *has* been out of the game for some time... or maybe he did it on purpose. What do you reckon?
The Eighteenth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Losing an Empress's sword in foolish blundering and only paying face to her search to retrieve it in Dunwall would surely result in excommunication from the Tower. This is of little concern to Daud.

Chapter Notes

Slightly longer chapter (again) because I have absolutely no control over how slowly this thing is going to burn, it seems intent to go entirely at its own pace.

Taking a mid(?)-story moment to thank everyone who’s read this far (seriously, it's like 40k), the comments and kudos people have left on this humble trash-ship have made a humble lady with a ladyboner for grouchy old men very happy. And I haven't received or stumbled upon any more hate for the ship, so all is well!

Briefly regarding future updates, I'm actually about to move to Southeast Asia (Thailand/Myanmar mostly) in a few days to start a new job/internship/sell my organs so my timezone and workload is going to change rather dramatically - HOWEVER, I have enough chapters in the backlog tank to stick to the once-a-week-ish update schedule for a... while.... and am going to do my best to make sure I keep updating, as it'll be a nice random point of continuity in my life as things change.

Final thing I almost forgot, dignified rice drew some fanart of Emily and it's WONDERFUL and absolutely slayed me, find it here (http://dignifiedrice.tumblr.com/post/153151721098/have-an-emily-in-rolled-up-sleeves-doing-push-ups). Thanks so much, much love to everyone, and enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Waking after the heat has heaved past its worst, Emily returns to the hunt for her lost sword with renewed vigour and continues scouring the grounds where Daud carelessly might have thrown it. Eventually she comes to the conclusion that she’s been putting her attention in the wrong direction, and starts looking upwards to examine the trees instead.

It’s with eyes to the cloudless blue sky that she catches a flash of silver amongst the green and gold of sunlight through the leaves, and sets off up the trunk like a wild creature, hauling herself over branches until – sure enough, she’s found it at last.

However, as Daud can’t possibly make anything easy for her – even potentially by accident – she only gets so far before the tree won’t hold her weight anymore, leaving her just out of reach of her precious rapier. She twists and strains, shaking the branches and trying to edge ever-closer, but nothing will move it or her near enough to grab the handle, which bobs merrily with her exertions as if making a mockery of her.
She falls back into a more comfortable perch, hatching a new plan when her sense of urgency rushes down like a tidal wave; sure enough, the branch she rests on drops as Daud bursts out of the void next to her. Scolding herself for letting her guard down as she throws herself out of the tree—anything to get away from him when they’re playing at her death—she thrashes in the air, managing to turn and only half fall as she hits the ground, rolling onto her back with an ungainly thud.

He follows, jumping or blinking, but either way looms over her moments later, hands each side of her shoulders.

“Get off me!” she spits in a way that’s nothing like the usual banter of their play-fighting, unleashing a kick that sends him flying back from her like a hinged trapdoor.

“Easy,” he somehow feels inclined to murmur, backing off as she fights away from him on hands and knees. “You were open.”

“I know!” she hisses in frustration, and caught in the moment slams her palm against the sun-baked ground. “Did it have to be now? I was so close.”

“To this?” he queries, raising an empty hand towards the tree. There’s a snarl of void magic, and then he holds her rapier like it’s always been there.

“You…” she murmurs, taken aback by the strange power. Stormclouds gather in her voice. “Could you have done that the whole time?”

“…I can only take something I know is there,” he replies cautiously, offering the sword back to her like he’s trying to pacify her temper.

“It’s one of the Outsider’s gifts?” she needles him instead, wondering how much he thinks she knows of the deity—far more than he thinks, most likely. He looks at her, but rather than speak the affirmation just gives a barely discernible nod. “Why were you hiding it from me?”

“Hiding?” he echoes sceptically, and shakes his head. “Things you haven’t seen before aren’t hidden.”

“An astutely political answer,” she commends sarcastically. “Would these not-hidden things have helped find my sword any faster?”

“Does that matter now?” he points out too cleverly to give the answer she’s really looking for.

“Were you helping at all?” she accuses with a thunderous scowl.

“You found it, didn’t you?” he replies like that’s good enough.

“It was your fault.”

“You resolved it just fine,” he states like that’s meaningful somehow.

“That’s not fair,” she disputes, relaxing somewhat to sit cross-legged across from him, rapier in her lap like a beloved pet.

“The world isn’t,” he counters sharply, the flux and flow between them shifting to ensure that neither is ever quite comfortable. “There’s a lesson you ought to have learned by now.”

“Very well, you aren’t being fair,” she ploughs onwards. “The state of the world doesn’t have to
enter into it.”

He seems to find her defence amusing, settling on one knee rather than getting to his feet like he’s going anywhere. “I’d have found your sword-”

“Sooner or later,” she finishes for him. “I know. I wanted it before that.”

“You have no special need for it,” he remarks entirely truthfully.

“That’s not reason enough to leave it at the top of an olive tree!” she snaps, and the shrill keen to her tone betrays too much.

*It’s mine and I want it*, her gut bellows, but at the same time she’s sure that’s exactly why Daud is doing what he’s doing – why he wouldn’t help her look in the first place. His renowned lack of accommodation is increasingly tiresome, but retaining her senses, she levels a polite smile that could send chills down even his tanned neck.

“What I mean is, your cooperation with me in this matter has been somewhat lacking.”

“Cooperation?” he quotes with a wry movement of an eyebrow. “Maybe you’re too used to that word meaning a person doing what you want them to, highness.”

“That isn’t what I…” she begins steaming, only to grasp how fruitless it is to argue with him about looking for a sword she holds in her hand now. “I was suggesting it was unfair of you not to assist.”

“Calling what you want ‘fair’ isn’t going to make me any more compelled to do it either,” he remarks almost playfully, like he’s enjoying the verbal exercise.

“Oh, that much you’ve taught me already,” she goads, then after a tantalisingly pause reasserts, “but it was unsportsmanlike.”

“You of all people ought to know such things are no more than conventions,” he remarks carefully, prowling around her temper like he’s looking to make a meal of it. “They can be changed or ignored at will.”

“How do you conceive of that?” she responds. “It’s a plain code of conduct, simple as right and wrong.” He chuckles in an entirely infuriating way.

“It’s far from simple,” he asserts. “Fair is no more than what the winner perceives as just.”

“Was your philosophy always so jaded?” she taunts.

“Maybe not when I was your age,” he returns the jab. “But I’ve watched the lines of morality being drawn and redrawn too many times to believe anything is absolute.”

“What would you have, then?” she challenges.

“I’d have less lip from you about what’s fair,” he counters practically. “Say what you mean, instead of hiding behind constructs based on a false dichotomy.” Phrases she would have never imagined coming from the Knife of Dunwall’s mouth, as he kneels in the dust and lengthening afternoon shadows lecturing her about morality.

“Lofty talk from a farmer,” she commends with an ambiguous streak of sarcasm; even though he’s not coming at her from a place of ignorance, she winds him up like a watch spring all the same.
“A farmer who doesn’t mistake right and wrong as existing outside of our invention, or justice as having aught to do with either,” he concludes cynically.

Although they’ve had thoughtful discussions before, it’s somehow surprising to discover he’s actually… intelligent, or educated in more than the practices of killing, at least.

“Then what is justice, by your reasoning?” she dares to probe, trying to reconcile her curiosity over how his mind works with the notion that she can use it to exert influence over him – more influence.

“Something we use to make the chaos of a cruel world seem meaningful,” he answers with a rattle in his breath as he exhales. “People make decisions, most of which have consequences. Calling that justice is a way of feeling better about it.”

“You told me yourself you once fought for something because it was the right thing to do,” she argues. Doesn’t say it was her, as they both know that already.

“Because I thought it was right,” he corrects, “and it gave me comfort to believe it.” And her to hear it.

“What if it’s widely held to be so by others?” she poses, treading carefully because he’s never less predictable than when they proceed into the seemingly still-raw subject of his past. “If it looks, moves and sounds like a cat, why not call it so?” He chuckles at the analogy.

“By all means,” he purrs, “but don’t count on it to kill rats.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she demands impertinently.

“If you expect behaviour to follow principles you’re likely to be disappointed,” he replies. “Armchair ethics rarely endure reality.”

The way he says it brings images into her head of the men he killed for coin; some were undoubtedly learned men; judges, politicians, men of character, even integrity. She wonders what made him stop believing in fixed morality – the act of killing, or how it changed the people whose lives he ended.

“So where does that leave us?” she questions. “If there’s no such thing as justice.”

“In the same place, seeing more clearly,” he answers solemnly. “The world doesn’t punish wicked people,” he issues with an ominous ring, stalling over a pause that lasts mere heartbeats before continuing, “If it did, I’d be long dead.”

The quiet that follows stretches out for what feels like an age, long enough for Emily to have walked around the valley and back again – but it still wouldn’t be long enough to process his last line.

“Say that again,” she requests.

“You heard me,” he asserts as this page in the chronicle of him unfolds.

“Is that where all this is coming from?”

“Even Corvo wouldn’t do it,” he remarks in a peculiarly flat way for a man discussing his own death. “I’ve no idea why.”
“... I do,” she replies meekly, and he bolts a look to her with the weight of a freight carriage. “I once asked him what he did to the man who killed mother,” she reveals, considering how much she really wants to share, but reminds herself that Daud has mostly dealt with her honestly and answered questions about the past – however reluctantly. “I wanted him to tell me you were dead, like her.”

“Naturally,” he utters like he’s won the argument on that alone. She recalls how he invited her to try and kill him when she first arrived – that no one else deserved the satisfaction more – and contemplates how deep his sincerity ran. If it still runs.

“He told me that he left you to something much worse than death,” she continues, and in spite of appearance is sure he’s hanging on her revelation like the faithful in an Abbey. She pauses when a bird cry sounds off somewhere in the distance, not least because he’s done it to her plenty of times, and it’s nice to dangle him for a moment before giving the answer, “A lifetime of remorse.”

“Hm,” he murmurs, arms stacked up on top of one another over a knee. “Clever Corvo.”

“The dead have no senses, so mercy is the crueller fate,” she quotes. “He uses it often at court.” The remembrance brings a throb of homesickness to her stomach, but she buries it by searching Daud’s face for new answers to old questions. “He’s right, isn’t he?”

He had to be, she thinks, because everything he’s done – this place and its self-imposed isolation, his quiet belief that a just world wouldn’t let him live – has made for far more suffering than if Corvo had cut his throat.

“Your lesson today is not to trust in false moralities,” he says at somewhat of a distance, pulling away as she knew he inevitably would. “Assassins will have none, and neither should you.”

“A lesson?” she queries light-heartedly. “What about the programme?”

“I can teach you both,” he replies, and there’s something strange about hearing him voice it out loud. She’s not sure it’s been said until now.

“Well... a fine pitch for my moral dissolution,” she satirises, edging away from the awkwardness of sincerity. “Father will be so pleased.” She holds his gaze for a moment but it’s too much to endure and she soon breaks away, looking for something else to latch onto. “Show me that power again,” she requests. “The pull.” His eyes crease, drawing brows together in distinctive ways she’s learning to interpret; curiosity, this time.

“Corvo hasn’t used it?”

“Would I ask otherwise?” she retorts. “How powerful is it?”

“Depends who and what’s involved,” he replies with deliberate ambiguity, unfolding a hand from the neat bundle of his arms to gesture for – what else – her sword.

“No,” she says, and he clicks his fingers insistently. Her withering glare seems to convey how likely that is to work, but then with a howl from the void it’s pulled from her lap into his hand anyway. “Cheat,” she accuses, and he chuckles – right before throwing her weapon spinning into the air.

Before she can chastise him to within an inch of his life, he’s ripped it back from the apex of its arc and the handle sits in his hand again. He returns it, flipping the blade expertly in his hand to offer it hilt-first at her. The edge rests precariously against his bare skin as she takes it from him; she could turn her hand and cut him if she wants to, but knowing she can is enough.
“Why wouldn’t the Outsider share such a gift with my father?” she questions.

“Don’t ask me,” he replies. “I thought the black-eyed bastard gave Corvo anything he wanted.”

“Oh really?” she delves further into the murky reaches of the deity’s dealings. “I was told he doesn’t play favourites.”

Daud laughs from the chest. “By who?”

“… His favourite, apparently,” she draws conclusions with narrowed eyes. It went without saying that her father wouldn’t admit any such thing – if anything he tried to keep his dealings with the Outsider away from her, for the little good it did. “When did he first appear to you?” she asks.


“Before or after you started killing for coin?” she counters, and he gives her a look like she’s cuffed him.

“Would it matter?” he remarks, and has her on that.

“I’m not sure,” she answers, reverting to honesty in the failure of other protocols. “I’ll let you know when you tell me.” Another test for him, ringing his mood like a bell to find its pitch.

“… My hands were already bloody,” he murmurs, and as he gets to his feet she considers if it makes a difference – it was the answer she expected, but there’s no satisfaction in being right for once. She thinks she wanted to be proven wrong.

“Wait,” she finds herself saying, throwing one last hook as he rests a hand against the bough of a tree. “The pull, does it work on people?”

“Too many questions,” he replies dourly. He’s had enough of her prying him open like a shellfish.

“Humour me,” she pleads, fixing him with a look that she hopes to burn through his resolve like acid. “Daud,” she entreats, and swears she can see the moment he buckles.

“Yes,” he delivers on a sigh. “If they’re close enough.”

“Am I close enough?” she immediately poses. They’re only a few feet apart, but even she weighs more than a sword.

“You don’t want me to use it on you.”

“Why not?” she demands. “More to the fact, why haven’t you done so before now?” The demand seems to amuse him, but it puts a bitter taste in her mouth this time – she wants to believe he’s not been holding back with her, even when she knows that he does.

“I’ve had no cause,” he replies with false ease.

“Liar,” she accuses. “In all our training and attempted assassination, you’ve never been in the position of benefiting from that ability?” He certainly doesn’t shy away from using the blink to his advantage, and if nothing else has improved her experience dealing with such a flighty, irritating approach.

“No,” he says gruffly.

“Liar,” she emphasises again. “What’s the real reason?”
“The chances of you facing someone who can use it are slim to none,” he starts to argue.

“But there is a chance,” she poses. “I should at least know what it’s like.”

“Why are you set on this?” he asks suspiciously. “The Outsider’s gifts aren’t for dabbling with.”

“I’m not dabbling,” she counters. “I’m simply asking to be prepared for all circumstances. Isn’t that what you’re supposed to help me with?” He lets out a hard-wearing sigh, thumbing at his mark like it’ll rub away. She’s studied her father’s before, the peculiar indelible way it permeates living skin. Daud’s hands are more weathered and wrinkled than Corvo’s, but the edges remain sharp as they’ve probably always been.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” he remarks ominously.

Emily starts to roll her eyes, but the next thing she knows is a feeling like she’s been run through the chest with a whaling chain, and she lifts off the ground as if being hauled out of water. Swearing she shouldn’t be able to breathe as she’s dragged towards him, when her chest bursts and she snatches fearful breaths, there’s no ocean pouring down her throat like her senses tell her there ought to be. She would tell him to stop if she had the voice or deficit of pride to do so, but is powerless to do anything more than tremble and take fearful gasps as he reels her in.

His clenched fingers draw inevitably close to her chest, grasping in a way she’s sure will drain the life out of her once she’s close enough, but she comes to a stop hovering a few inches off the ground in front of him with the void screaming in her ears. Then the noise quietens, and it all goes away.

Her feet touch the floor, but knees buckling moments later prompt him to grab her before she crumples to the ground. She leans into him with a desperate breath, clawing at his other arm for support until it finds hers and holds firm. She’d thought blinking was bad, but this was far worse.

He lowers slowly to the ground with her, any attempt to do a thing except keep her company in the shade of olive trees utterly failed, and comforts her in a soft, devastatingly apologetic rasp.

“That’s why.”

Chapter End Notes

This is one of those chapters where I got moderately/highly side-tracked constructing a debate between Daud and Emily about philosophy, basically, because what's a good slow burn without understanding some of the underlying themes in our character's ethical landscapes??? I don't even know, y'all...

But I do believe Daud is a smart and eloquent cookie, if his writings in-game are anything to go by, and he /did/ somehow make it into the academy of natural philosophy for a time, so I like indulging myself by considering what kind of code of ethics/view of the world a man who's done all the things he has might have.

There may also be a longer post somewhere in future notes about how I see/portray the Outsider in this 'mildly divergent' canon timeline, but suffice to say Emily is more
familiar with him than she appears to be in DH2, and I favour the smarmy-lil-shit characterisation of him in the first game more than the second.

Thanks for reading, and have an excellent day! *does a kickflip*
Emily Kaldwin knows that due to the conditions of her upbringing, there are certain things she takes for granted; though she would note that the nature of taking something as read prevents her from being aware of them until they’re unexpectedly not done. However, that this should include Daud making her dinner is a little embarrassing.

She arrives in the kitchen when her stomach tells her it’s time to eat, only to find a fire hasn’t even been lit and he’s nowhere to be found. She’s given him a wide berth since he most recently scared her half to death – at her insistence, no less – and left him to his devices about the place. He’s been making up for work lost to swordplay and debating ethics all afternoon, ferrying produce about the grounds even as the sun sinks over the hills.

Standing helplessly in the kitchen on an empty stomach, she’s struck with how easy it’s been to depend on him for basic necessities. Something she’s scorned at times, but he’s never failed to put a meal in her belly – at least not thus far. Hearing him on the terrace outside, she pokes her head around the door: it’s getting dark, muted colours of the landscape failing into greys, though he moves as surely as ever as he brings a basket onto the terrace.

“Daud?” she draws his attention, straining to pick out his silhouette in the shadows.

“What?” comes his reply, all business as the shuffling of his sandals continues.

“… What’s for dinner?” she asks more timidly than she imagined, and hears him stop moving.

“Dinner?” he echoes like he’s new to the concept. “I hadn’t given it thought.”

“What?” it’s her turn to parrot. “You’re usually eating it by now.” Without the same visual keys to observe him, she tunes into the noises he makes with greater attention; a puff of breath that she wouldn’t have noticed were she busy trying to decipher his expression lends the thought that he’s amused.

“Am I really so predictable?” he asks to the sound of setting something down; probably more peaches, she thinks with distaste.
“Quite definitely,” she asserts, and he huffs again.

“You make it,” he announces, which is solidly not what she’s expecting – perhaps he’s doing it just to be contrary.

“Really?” Of course she can sustain herself if she needs to, but it’s enough of a struggle for Callista to ensure she and her father fed themselves, let alone others. “How?”

Daud chuckles and his shadow looms closer, sandaled footsteps sounding him out as he crosses the terrace and stops by the table. She wishes she could see what he’s doing, and remembers the lanterns hidden among the beams of the trellis.

“Light a fire, I’ll be back soon,” he says quietly through the darkness. Rather than arrest him for more information, she follows the path that will result in her eating soonest and does as he asks.

She’s moved on to lighting the lamps outside when he comes back with an armful of vegetables, walking past her into the kitchen and dumping them on the table. She follows to find him buried inside a cupboard she rarely sees open, rummaging noisily and eventually pulling out some kind of clay dish.

“What’s that?” she queries as he blows dust off its peculiar coned lid.

“What you’ll be cooking with,” he answers, rubbing the end of his sleeve around the inside of the bowl, and she smiles at the thought of what such an approach to cleanliness would do to her physicians.

“But what is it?” she reiterates as he sets it down on the table and returns to the cupboard.

“Easy to use,” he remarks with his head still buried in the cabinet.

“Charming,” she quips, “and the answer to my question?” she finishes acerbically, raising her eyebrows at his back until he casts a knowing stare over his shoulder at her.

“Tajeen,” he names, and might as well not have because the word means nothing to her. “From the Pandyssian isles.”

“How did it end up here?”

“I’ve my ways,” he remarks cryptically, emerging with some kind of ironwork holder that he sets on the table beside the crockery, slotting the dish inside so the whole thing could be suspended over a fire. “You’ll want the vegetables skinned and chopped, to be cooked in the bottom with oil,” he pauses as if for effect, “plenty of it.”

“Very well,” she says with a passable act of competence. “Seasoning?” she queries next, and he crosses the kitchen again to consult the unmarked row of pots he keeps on a shelf over the stove, bringing several back to set on the table alongside the rest of her equipment. He taps one or two fingers on top of each, sparing a glance at her to see if she understands.

“Spoonfuls?” she suggests, bone-dry tone like she’s been drying it in the sun alongside his peaches.

“Don’t overdo it,” he feels entitled to warn, as if she’s here to learn how to cook as well as avoid assassinations.

“I’m not completely hopeless,” she replies, but if she’s being honest her education has been focused more on the etiquette of consuming food than its preparation.
“We’ll see about that,” he remarks in his standard breed of vaguely disapproving. “Throw everything inside, put the lid on and hang it over the fire – don’t touch it after that,” he warns.

“Why not?”

“Fiddling lets out the steam,” he drones, looking around like he’s checking for anything he forgot. “Resist the temptation.” Delivered like he knows all too well what the impact of telling her not to do something has on her desire to do it.

“I’ll do my best,” she quips, meaning to be sarcastic and somehow coming out mistakenly sincere.

“You’ll be fine,” he responds in equal measure, and she could swear the walls get a little closer. She was far more comfortable when they were swinging weapons around each other than now – it’s these quiet moments that she fears losing control, set off by some unexpected kindness or provocation. That they’re often one and the same doesn’t help.

Thankfully he departs without further complications, leaving her to follow his sparse instructions and contemplate whether this is an exercise in convenience or taking her out of her comfort zone, resolving that it’s likely both. She makes quick work of the vegetables, arbitrary decisions about what ‘plenty’ of oil is, then combines the ingredients and fits the lid onto the dish, hanging it over the fire as she hopes for the best.

Being so specifically instructed not to ‘fiddle’ with their evening meal as it cooks and with nothing else to do in the meantime, Emily decides to address the toll that a day of training and fighting – both physical and verbal – has taken on her, and by lamplight fills a bucket of water that she brings back to the terrace to wash up with.

Even though the evening is warm by its own standards, the temperature has abated enough that she doesn’t feel inclined to a dalliance with the makeshift shower just yet – much less in the dark – and suffices with a washcloth. She sits on one of the benches and leans back against the table wiping a fine layer of dirt, sweat and blood from her skin as she wrestles the insidious feeling of a day well spent.

Hearing Daud long before she sees him, he strides from dark into light without breaking pace – a basket cast over his shoulder as usual – but slows upon seeing her, seeming about ready to trip over his sandals as he comes to a stop a few paces from her.

“You have to do that here?” he comments like she’s somehow in his way, and she bristles.

“Your bathing facilities are out of order,” she replies frostily. He raises an eyebrow that she reads well enough as a question, so she points a finger upwards and elaborates, “The lights are out.”

In truth, as comfortable as she’s become – at times – she’s yet to be enough at ease to strip in the semi-private shelter. A view over the hills is fine, but it is the one in that worries her more, and the scrubby trees encroaching on the outbuildings like the whole thing is being given back to nature don’t do much for her sense of security either.

“How’s dinner coming on?” he murmurs as he unloads his haul, seemingly determined to be looking anywhere except at her as she lazily rubs the wet cloth around her neck.

“I don’t know,” she replies primly. “You told me not to meddle.”
“And you didn’t?” He seems genuinely surprised.

“Yes, Daud,” she replies with enough sarcasm to eradicate any perceived subservience the line could otherwise lend.

He gives a murmur that she could interpret equally as pleased or displeased, and follows him into the kitchen as he lifts the lid of the dish with a hand wrapped in a cloth, releasing a great burst of steam.

“You told me not to do that,” she remarks a little indignantly.

“So I could,” he says softly, wielding a spoon more threateningly than his sword as he taste-tests her work. A moment of evaluation holds with anticipation that she’d admit to, but he just adds a few pinches of something before replacing the lid.

“How is it?” she asks straight rather than going around the point.

“Fine,” he grunts. She’s annoyed about both caring enough to ask, and that his answer is exactly as unsatisfying as she should’ve expected.

“Will it be suitable to eat any time soon?” she follows up, feeling a frustrated lack of control in a meal that she made.

“Needs a little more,” he replies easily, and she gives an audible huff that seems to bring him no end of mirth. “Hungry?” he suggests.

“Aren’t you?” she returns with an edge in her voice cut on a yowling stomach. That he looks like he has to think about the question only annoys her further.

“I suppose,” he remarks pensively. “I’ve been busy.” And he’s tired, she believes, not least because of the subtle way it slows him down – everything from words to actions reduces pace, until it’s like nothing in the world could rush him any faster than he damn well pleases.

“Hm,” she does without meaning to mimic at first, then resentfully sticks to a dissatisfied pout as he puzzles her lacking response.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he reacts, picking up her attitude like dropped fruit.

“What?” she responds with faux-shock. “It’s a non-committal grunt – your bit, in fact,” she shoots off in a way she could chalk up to her blood sugar level, but perhaps also a little to see if he’ll let her get away with it. His expression makes her think he might not even be aware that he does it, and she considers exactly how tied up in his characteristics she’s become.

Instead of playing back to her quibbling, he defies every affront and gives a soft chuckle that’d incline her to start throwing things if she didn’t have excellent self-control.

“My world doesn’t always revolve around you, highness,” he patiently informs her. She considers starting a fight, but because of the careful implication that sometimes it does, goes in a different direction.

“Can it pause long enough to procure me a glass of wine?” she entreats, and is endlessly pleased the question seems to have caught him out.

“Hm,” he evaluates in a true display of the original article.
“See,” she catches. “There you go.”

His lips twist into a not-quite smile as he looks at her with laughter and firelight flashing across slate eyes, before giving an assenting nod and turning away to fulfil her request.

“Try to keep the glass on the table this time,” he gibes as he sets cup and bottle down next to her. Just one.

“Aren’t you going to partake?” she recites in a scripted piece of diplomacy, but he waves away the enquiry as he returns to the fire.

She pours herself a vaguely-guilty cup but promptly stops herself feeling bad when her stomach gives a rumble, and takes up staring a hole in his back as he finishes the meal, nursing wine that goes straight to her head.

Watching him move around the kitchen with absolute confidence in every action, it strikes her that she’s observing Daud in an environment designed by and for him alone. He told her it took a long time to get the house where it was now, and she notices for the first time how many little touches there are – hooks and shelves, places to keep things that only he would ever need.

A question slips off the end of a tongue slick with wine, its significance only becoming clear after the words have left her mouth.

“Has it been lonely?”

He stops dead, square shoulders backing onto her from the hearth, and though she can’t see his face she knows it’d betray nothing.

“Has what?” he feigns ignorance, unhooking the dish from the fire with a poker and bringing it to the table.

“Being here,” she supplies as he lifts the lid to a fragrant a cloud of steam. “All this ‘peace and quiet’.”

He’s still for a moment; she knows she’s already gotten a lot from him today, but it doesn’t stop her wanting more. She can’t leave a nut uncracked.

“Compared to what?” he diverts, sitting down across from her and reaching for the leftover bread she set out before he could – proving he’s still predictable enough to be pre-empted. “I couldn’t stay.” He spoons soft, slow-cooked vegetables onto a hunk of crust and eats it in bites that don’t even stop on the table; for a man claiming to have given food little thought this evening, he’s just about inhaling it.

“Agreed,” she confirms resolutely, spooning a portion onto her plate. “But there are places between here and Dunwall inhabited by more than rabbits.”

She takes a bite and it’s not what she was expecting, the spices unlike the classic Serkonian flavours she knows, forgetting that he’d suggested the dish was Pandysssian. She contemplates yet another mystery he’s keeping from her – even the islands are far from here, and he’s led her to believe he hasn’t left this place in over a decade.

“What’s your point?” he almost snaps, though without shattering the conversational air their talks over dinner have increasingly adopted.

“I wasn’t making a point,” she retorts just as sharply, loading up her own pre-portioned bites to
consume as quickly and aggressively as possible. “I asked a question, which you’re continuing to avoid answering.”

“Because you’re prying,” he accuses with half a mouthful in his cheek.

“So?” she remarks with a smug grin, enjoying the sliver of poetic justice it accords her.

“When I left, all I wanted was to fade from memory.” he delivers to his half-eaten crust, and she’s struck by his use of the past tense. “This place suited my purpose.”

“Removing yourself from civilisation won’t erase the legacy you left behind,” she counters a touch bitterly – she’d still have a mother, for one. If anything his absence enhanced it, because even she – with her revulsion for gossip about around the infamous once-terror of Dunwall – had heard more rumours about him than she’d ever have need for.

“Then what would you have?” he asks between bites with a fleck of something sitting on the corner of his mouth. The lack of anything even resembling etiquette is alarming, but the thought only makes her realise he’s probably never been part of a society that cared for manners, and that maybe he puts them on more than she’s realised. “Stroll into the nearest town, tell them I retired from some business in the city and start over?”

“No,” she spits on impulse, knowing the picture is wrong somehow; he can’t just live like the rest of them, as if it never happened.

“Ahh,” he catches, wiping his chin on his hand. “Exactly.”

“So that’s it?” she poses. “This is supposed to be your punishment?”

“I thought that was your domain,” he quips.

“Be serious,” she scolds. “You told me you don’t believe the world exacts justice, so you’re taking it upon yourself?”

“Does this seem like a fitting punishment to you?” he puts to her, using bread crust as a shovel to scoop flavourful sludge from the bottom of the dish. Between them they’ve almost devoured it.

“It depends,” she replies, refusing to play into absolutes she knows he has no time for. Of course this idyllic retreat is nothing like the cells of Colridge, but solitary confinement remains one of the harshest punishment reserved for inmates, and he’s willingly endured more of it than most people’s sanity could withstand. “The term ‘self-imposed exile’ does leap to mind.”

Exile was the most extreme sentence her mother had levied during her short years after discouraging the death penalty, a legacy she continues. She wonders if an exception should’ve been made for the Empress’s own assassin, but finds herself unconvinced. Rules with exceptions may as well not be rules, and she’d been raised to believe personal bias had no place on a throne.

“You’re making connections that aren’t there,” he accuses.

“Am I?” she returns presumptively. “You flee to the hills for a decade of wilful isolation, yet I’m making incredulous links?”

“Yes,” he devolves into a hiss. “I didn’t come here for flagellation, I just…” he hesitates and Emily holds her breath in her throat, fearful of spooking him by so much as exhaling, “needed to get away,” he finishes, pinching his thumb and fingertips over the bridge of his nose in a rarely-shown sign of stress.
“From what?” she asks, voice dropping instinctively to a register she more typically reserves for survivors of trauma – prisoners of war, plague orphans. Not a man who’s spilled more blood from others than himself.

Yet his croak is the utterance of someone who has been used up, and it occurs to her that loneliness may not be the first of his problems.

“Everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Uh... I know I say this a lot, but the end of this chapter is one of my fav scenes in this fic so far.

Someone asked Harvey whatshisface on twitter if Daud is alive during DH2 and if he's okay, to which the response was something like 'yes he's alive, but definitely not okay' and definitely captures how I felt writing this scene. It's important to remember that while Daud might come across as reasonably functional and shit-together, he's in a controlled environment that's been engineered completely towards him, so he's not even nearly as okay as he comes across most of the time because of how deep he is into his self-constructed comfort zone.

The early part of this chapter (with all the cooking) goes out to all the readers who have a soft spot for domesticity with these two, and it was great fun doing the research for it. Serkonos is vaguely Mediterranean in my imaginations, so for the Pandyssian isles I wanted something a little North African in influence. I jumbled the spelling a little, but a tagine is a Moroccan dish in the sense of a physical dish *and* a culinary one (much like the Spanish paella is the pan as well as the thing cooked in it) and is used for slow-cooking meat and/or veggies.
A new morning after a night of troubling dreams finds Emily back in the kitchen, wine glass changed for a tin mug as she shakes false memories of murdering her mother from behind her eyes and brews a pot of coffee. Daud is nowhere to be found – already working, she assumes – but a little breathing space between them wouldn’t be inadvisable after yesterday’s trials.

She undertakes a challenge of her own in making the uncomfortable, backless benches fit for purpose and succeeds in some measure, leaning against the table on one elbow and propping her heels on the edge of the counter as she takes a first bitter sip. It’s a stretch, but is better than sitting at the table, straight-backed and at risk of remembering the previous evening too vividly – wondering if she pushed him too far.

He didn’t stay long after his last admission, taking himself away to his room without even saying goodnight – another thing she didn’t realise she’d come to expect – and leaving her to tidy and put out the lanterns like this place was her own. She told herself it was to avoid his disapproval come the morning, ignoring the tinge of something else in her motivation, which lingers in her mouth like flavours that haven't quite faded.

The sound of footsteps down the hallway turn her head to the door like it’s on a string, and when Daud slopes through, her first quickly-stifled instinct is to snatch her feet down from the counter, though she catches herself before it comes to that and holds still. He doesn’t hold a monopoly on concealing reactions in this household.

“Good morning,” she remarks, laden with surprise. “You’re up rather late.” He gives a bleary grunt and pads on bare feet to the stove, even appearing to rub sleep out of his eyes.

“S’there coffee?” he murmurs outright groggily. The percolator only makes two cups – one of which she nurses – but she’s drunk the second out of his enough times to ensure she daren’t protest.
“Just enough,” she answers, and he pours the rest for himself while she takes a moment to appreciate that this is the first time she’s woken up before him. She’s so accustomed to his being active long before her that the sight of him with tufts of hair at odd angles, spooning sugar into his cup like he’s not yet fully conscious, would be beyond credible were she not actively witnessing it.

He turns from the counter and takes a couple of steps across the kitchen floor then halts in front of her crossed ankles. Doesn't even fix her with a scolding look as she prevents him from moving further, simply waits, and without a reaction to garner she unceremoniously lifts her feet to let him by. He slumps forward at the table an overly safe distance from her, then yawns so widely she can see a gold cap on one of his back teeth. She puzzles what could have exhausted him so, then with flashes of drills, swordfights and working deep into the evening, realises that she may as well be the answer.

“What’s on the programme today?” she asks like the dutiful student she’s verbally contracted to be, choosing to tread the path of civility at least until they've finished their coffee.

“Oh,” he murmurs; a hoarse echo that comes up from inside of his cup. “You care about the programme now?”

“How dare you insinuate I’m anything less than reverent towards the programme,” she retorts as her offering falls from the sky like a lead songbird.

“Coulda fooled me,” he mumbles, swilling his coffee before taking another sip.

“Yesterday was a minor side-track,” she maintains, “and I believe I met all the demands of the much-esteemed programme before it happened.”

He scoffs like the mere suggestion of his demands being met in an appropriate fashion is a tremendous joke, then runs a hand through his hair, settling some of the scruff.

“All right,” he says, muffled by his hand as he rests his chin in his palm and looks lazily over at her. “Today’s simple. If I set eyes on you, game over.”

“Meaning what, exactly?” she queries.

“Stealth training,” he explains gruffly, picking up his head and taking another drink. “Stick as close to me as you dare, but once I set foot outside that door I shouldn’t see or hear from you all day.” Trust Daud to contrive a training exercise that involved being left alone; how terribly convenient for him.

“Is this really part of the programme?” she asks with narrowed eyes.

“Of course,” he replies bluntly. “What you can do without me noticing is more important than any flash.” She lets the taunt slide, but only for now.

“You realise what you’re describing amounts to a game of hide and seek?” she puts to him haughtily, but for all her baiting he won’t bite.

“If you like,” he remarks with what might be the barest movements of a shrug.

“What’s to stop me hiding in my room?” Aside from the blistering heat, which seems to be mounting day on day.

“It’d be a cheap win,” he states, giving her a sideways look. She runs her tongue along the back of her teeth, hating that he’s right.
“Is that an appeal to my sense of fairness?” she poses.

“No,” he retorts, evading her hook like he’s in no mood to be the fish in today’s angling session. “Your sense of competition.”

There’s an unsettling pang in her stomach as she grapples with the realisation that just as she’s coming to understand him, so too is he learning to cultivate her behaviour like garden vegetables.

“If it’s a contest, then what are the stakes?” she issues, letting herself be reeled in this time because it’s not as if she's anything better to do.

“There aren’t,” he delivers like that concludes the matter; you did it because he said so, it went without saying.

“That’s no fun,” she declares sullenly, pulling a disapproving face over her cup.

“Is that what Corvo sent you here for?” he retorts on what seems to be a coffee-fed wit. “Besides, you need a wager to have stakes.” The beginnings of grin chiselled into the corner of his mouth suggest he’s just as susceptible to a new game as she is.

“That’s easy,” she says assuredly. “I wager you can’t find me.”

“You like placing losing bets?” he remarks like he’s finally joined the waking world.

“I thought overconfidence was unbecoming of an assassin?” she angles. “Kill the ego, remember?”

“Your loss,” he replies indifferently, but soon follows, “Name your stakes.”

“If I win, I want…” It’s not a terribly long deliberation, because there’s only one thing he has that she really desires. “Answers,” she settles, and his brows draw together like they’re stitched with thread.

“To what?” he asks suspiciously.

“You,” she returns concisely. “If I win, I want you to answer… five questions in complete honesty.”

“As I recall, I’ve been giving you honest answers,” he rumbles begrudgingly.

“Not enough,” she fires back, and swears there’s a flash of something closer to fear than anything else in his eyes. They both know she’s been picking at him like a seabird on barnacles, and it’s only a matter of time before she pulls out whatever he’s trying to hide under that sun-baked shell. “What else do you have to offer?” she points out.

“Three questions,” he haggles.

“Five,” she insists.

“Three.” It’s not a negotiation.

“All right,” she concedes, like she hadn’t deliberately pitched high in the first place – she’s a head of state, of course she knows gambits. “You drive a hard bargain.”

Inspired by she doesn’t know what, she holds out her cup at him in some symbolic gesture, but further to her surprise, he reaches over to clank his own against it.
Daud gives her a head start, so fifteen minutes over hot ground and a further few climbing takes Emily onto the roof of one of the outbuildings, belly to warm chunks of ceramic tile and her chin resting on her hands with a view of the house, so she can watch him emerge in the distance, hat and basket at the ready. He heads down the sloping grounds and disappears from view after a few minutes and she starts to doze, thinking this might be the easiest victory she’s going to claim from him yet.

That is, until she’s rudely disturbed by the bouncing of an apricot off her head as it flies out of the cover of nearby trees. She makes a half-swallowed noise of surprise and pushes up on her hands.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” comes his voice, still under cover, and it’s only by rebooting all of her hard-worked senses that she even realises where he is – that’s what she gets for daring to relax. She hops to a crouching position on the edge of the roof and drops, landing into a roll that brings her back onto her feet a few meters from where he stands, basket over one shoulder and hat tipped back in a perfectly rustic picture.

“That was a warm-up,” she remarks, only for him to fling another fruit at her.

“You plan to win by arguing with me?” he says smarmily, reaching into his basket to pull out another and tossing it threateningly up and down in one hand. “I thought I was clear about the rules.”

“But you started it,” she points out in spite of knowing how ridiculous it sounds.

“So?” he retorts. If she’s not mistaken he’s enjoying getting in her way like this; shifting their repartee from friendly to antagonistic as easily as flipping a coin. “You have ten minutes to get lost.”

“You gave me fifteen be-“ she starts to protest, but the raising of his eyebrow points out that she’s wasting arbitrary units of time he's no way of actually measuring in the first place. It's all still part of the game. “Fine,” she sighs, and sets off in a half-hearted jog.

She’s up a tree, back matched to the curve of a bough and feet outstretched along the branch, getting positively bored when she hears footsteps from afar.

The ever-present shuffle of Daud’s sandals places him somewhere off her nine o’ clock, but she turns only her head, holding still otherwise. She should be obscured from view at ground level, and is already contemplating the questions she’ll ask him when an overripe pear comes catapulting up at her.

She dives from her perch on instinct, slinging herself head-first at the ground and catching the next branch she can on the way down, legs swinging like a pendulum and turning a half-flip in the air as she lets go and lands. She locks eyes with him standing at the foot of a nearby tree.

“How-” she begins, but the amused tilt of his head drives her to bite her tongue. She doesn’t want to give him the satisfaction.

“You breathe like a steam engine,” he decrees anyway.
“A what?” she replies, unable to place why the phrase is familiar.

“Ah,” he murmurs with a wry grin. “Before your time.” She gives an unimpressed huff that he must mistake for an invitation. “Take deep breaths, counting out for twice as long as in,” he continues like she’s just asked him for a lesson – solidly not what’s happened.

“Why?” she demands just a little petulantly.

“It lowers the heartrate,” he explains.

“I’m supposed to quieten my heart now?” she queries, considering how amusingly unsuccessful his policy of not-seeing and not-hearing her has been thus far, and how much of it has been as a result of his own chatter.

“Control it,” he corrects. “Sitting up a tree huffing and puffing like you haven’t a care in the world gives you away.”

“It’s hot,” she protests.

“For which you can have my sincere apologies,” he retorts entirely sarcastically, and she thinks he must be particularly enjoying this trial by the mood it seems to be putting him in, “but no excuses.”

“Fine,” she sighs with an over-dramatic roll of her eyes. “I’ll work on it.”

“Good,” he asserts, and she hates the way he says it. Good as in, barely good enough. “You have five minutes.”

“Five?!?” she retorts, but in the face of his unimpressed and famously-unaccommodating look, heaves a sigh that’s exactly the kind of thing that put her here in the first place, then turns and starts running.

Emily sits like a spider at the edge of her trap, a single overripe peach in her hand as she counts her breaths in time with Daud’s distantly approaching footsteps. She hears him get close enough that were she to peer around the tumble-down wall she’s crouched behind it’d surely be game over, but holds her resolve and waits for him to take the bait.

There’s a telling rush of air and rustle of leaves that signals her moment to strike, so she jolts out from behind her cover and hurls the projectile square at his back. She actually hits her target, leaving a damp mark on his shirt where the warm flesh squelches against him. He vanishes as it bounces back and a tell-tale hand comes down on her shoulder in the same moment. She turns to see him towering over her.

“Nice try,” he remarks not enough like a compliment for it to be gratifying, “but you still gave your position away.”

“Why should you get to have all the fun?” she poses.

“That’s not-”

“Part of the programme?” she finishes the line for him. “I still got you.” She stands up and he slides back a step, glancing over at the dummy – quite literally a stuffed shirt – that she slung up a tree for him to mistake as her, now laying on the ground after being knocked out by whatever he’d
been trying to pelt her with this time.

“It doesn’t count,” he states, and if that doesn’t just drive her up the wall.

“Why?” she demands crossly.

“Because the wager is that I can’t find you,” he reminds her, and the rules aren’t as fun when he’s using them to rip her victories away. “You have five minutes.”

“Ten,” she insists. “Because you fell for it.”

He gives her a lingering look, and then a puff of breath that’s not quite a sigh.

“Ten,” he concedes.

“That’s more like it,” she declares haughtily, picking up her clothes-dummy to sling over her shoulder and twirling her fingers at him as she walks away.

The sun passing overhead marks the shift into the time of day when Emily would much rather be asleep in the hammock than trying to hide from Daud, but with a wager still to win she’s forced to find a solution to both problems. It presents in the creation of a small patch of shade on the first-floor roof just outside her bedroom window, so she grabs handfuls of olives and figs as she passes through the kitchen before heading upstairs to seek it out.

After a full morning of heat the room itself is a stone-clad oven, as usual, but she merely passes through and climbs out onto the roof, stealing herself away in the shade and letting the warmth of the walls lull her into a doze.

She’s disturbed when a peach comes soaring up in a deep arc over the roof and lands on the tiles near her with a fleshy *splat*. It’s followed by another in quick succession, this one bearing down on her with such deadly accuracy she’s able to reach up and catch it, the flesh giving too easily in her hand and sliding between her fingers before she flings it abhorrently in the direction it came. Had she waited a moment longer she might have hit Daud, who soon ripples into view on the edge of the roof with his arms crossed.

“You must be cheating,” she insists irately, wiping the rest of the wet mess onto her long-since ruined shirt and ruing the tacky feeling it leaves behind.

“How?” he queries, and she hasn’t thought beyond that.

“Some… gift of the Outsider, probably,” she feigns, and he shuffles on the spot. The tiles are hot in the sun, too hot for her to endure, and as he’s left his awkward, clumpy sandals down on the ground, he seems to be enduring it with just a little discomfort. Good.

“That’s cheating now? I thought you wanted to be prepared for all circumstances?” he paraphrases, and there’s still satisfaction in knowing that the rules are being bent for her – he’s no reason to come here and start quibbling over technicalities, yet here he is.

“It’s…” she’s about to say *unfair*, but stops herself, meeting his eyes. “What do I do, then?”

“Keep your distance,” he says. “Even the black-eyed bastard’s powers have their limits,” he growls, and she’s surprised at his terminology, far the way her father has alluded to his powerful
‘friend’. “Though if you must know, I spotted you from over there.” He points out towards the walled garden just visible along the hillside, and she gives a helpless shrug.

“I tried,” she remarks.

“You came out the window?” he picks up after a moment’s silence, and she pairs a vaguely affirmative noise with a nod, leaning back against the wall and unfolding her legs into the growing column of shade. “Good,” he murmurs, and she could be mistaken for hearing it in a different tone for once – good as in, actually good. Of course, he has to ruin it by launching into a classically critical lesson. “You’re finally starting to use what’s around you to your advantage, though you need to be more aware of-”

“I thought you weren’t supposed to see or hear from me all day?” she interjects spitefully, deciding she’d much prefer a slow lunch and a nap than enduring yet another compliment-ruining lecture, and he gives her a startled look, like being caught in the act of familiarity.

“… So I was,” he replies like even the overbearing sun can’t bring a touch of warmth to the words, and without further issue vanishes.

Chapter End Notes

I felt like this wasn't a super-eventful chapter, but on final readthrough decided that it makes me cackle a lot and that's worth something in its own right.

One of the most enjoyable things about writing at this *microscopic* level of interaction is getting to see characters in a whole spectrum of moods... especially with fruit-flinging sassafrasses that can't go more than a few hours without falling out. I'm also /endlessly/ fond of anything that can fall under the heading 'sleepy Daud' so we take these things as they come I suppose.

As always thanks for reading and showing the love, we're creeping up on 50k and I'm not even *nearly* through with these two, so gold stars for everyone who's come this far in what is an admittedly rather niche pairing/concept.

EDIT: I may not update as regularly over the holidays, realising how fast the festive season is approaching! Normal updates should/might resume some time in January.
The Twenty-First Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily has been hiding from Daud for the greater part of the afternoon, but the real question is whether he can keep hiding from her.

Chapter Notes

After no fewer than two failed attempts I’ve made it into Myanmar (or Burma as it was formerly/sometimes still known) - long story short, get your visas in order *before* trying to board the plane.

I’m thrilled to be here and am planning to spend the holidays trekking around the mountains in a region called Shan State, so will be living the isolationist dream to some extent and also totally incommunicado. Will resume updating once I’m back in a place with semi-reliable internet (which is about the best this country gets) provided I don’t pull a ‘Daud’ and never come back.

Happy last-before-holidays update chapter!

When what feels like hours pass between some piece of fruit flying at her seemingly out of nowhere – especially after her icy response to his attempt to give her a lesson – Emily starts to wonder if Daud is even still looking for her. She stifles concerns over her harshness with the reminder that she is perfectly entitled to decide if she’s not in the mood to be talked at on a hot clay roof in the middle of the napping hour. He invariably catches her out sooner or later anyway – usually when she’s lost in thought - but has stopped speaking, sometimes already gone before the thing he’s thrown at her has even hit the ground.

After being endlessly pelted with fruit from various branches and hiding places she’d thought were safe from his cutting gaze right until they weren’t, she eventually decides the ability to move *away* from him is more important than being convincingly hidden, and starts creeping around the grounds from spot to spot as soon as she hears footsteps. He told her the Outsider’s gifts were limited by range, so even if he *is* using such an unfair advantage, maintaining a safe distance and staying lightfooted seems to be the best way to remain undetected.

It’s lonelier, but as if the solitude of this place is contagious, she finds herself easily occupied by the tranquillity of this house so firmly hidden from the rest of the world; where even Daud’s intrusion – as bound to the landscape as he is – could be unnecessary. She thinks instinctively of Dunwall, where her father and the advisors she’s left behind to tend to the Empire in her absence, but when she can’t see a sign of civilisation for as far as the eye can stretch, finds it all too easy to put them out of her mind. Whatever happens beyond the horizon, nothing here would change.

The day is uncomfortably warm, which doesn’t help, and were she not determined to win their silly wager she’d have given up and be sprawled out in the hammock a long time ago. Even when the
sun completes the most aggressive part of its cycle overhead, the ground seems to radiate the heat it’s absorbed over the day and there’s little respite in temperature, even as shadows start slowly overtaking the land.

She wipes away sweat that seems determined to channel down her chest at every opportunity as she moves doggedly around the grounds, then eventually gives in and makes her way over to the water pump in a fit of exasperation, only stopping once when she thinks she hears him, though it proves to be no more than the breeze rippling through the trees.

The pump is a solid metal fixture, old but well maintained – she assumes it was here before he was – and uses it to pull a stream of cold groundwater into cupped hands that she splashes over herself. She could brave the outdoor shower, but not knowing where her opponent is sets her far too on edge to risk that kind of exposure.

As if summoned by her very thoughts, the *shuck-shuck* of his sandals starts dancing in her ear from down the path towards the house. Without thinking of anything except escaping detection, she bolts into the cluster of scrubby trees that encroach on the back of the buildings and flies up the first one she can reach the branches of. It’s a risky form of cover, but the broken-down walls won’t give her much to hide behind – and old habits die hard.

She scrambles up a few low-hanging branches but overwrites her urge to keep climbing and shake the tree around anymore than she already has, staying low where the foliage is thicker and focusing on laying as flat as she can along a large bough. The sound of her own breathing conjures one of his lessons into her head, and with great effort she exhales for double the time she inhales, feeling it settle her body with a firm hand. She does so *hate* when he’s right.

Instead of dwelling on it she devotes all her faculties to embodying stillness while the sounds of his footsteps continues unabated – a good sign – and cuts a picture of him in her mind, pinning it to his location as she tracks him up to the pump and starts up a stream of water.

She relays scenarios in her mind and tries to match them to the sounds; washing of hands, shuffling of feet, waiting for a sudden silence that might signify he’s realised something is wrong. Keeping her heartbeat under a strict count and whispering breaths like secrets, to her surprise he seems to be going about his business unaware – though she’ll she saves her sigh of relief until he is well away.

She hears his footsteps clapping out his path further into the buildings and reasons that he wouldn’t move so noisily if he had suspicion – or so she hopes, because she’s in this to win a wager, but can’t deny that it’s all in aid of her learning something. To be more like him, in a still-uncomfortable way.

Although she can’t see him at first, she realises that her perch has a view of the wall where the shower is mounted when he suddenly blinks into view on top of it holding a bucket of water, which he tips into the rig and climbs down as the shower starts, just visible through clusters of leaves. They’re at a reasonable distance, though not far enough to escape simple eyeshot if he were to glance in the wrong direction.

She forgets counting and simply ceases *breathing* when he reaches behind his head to pull off his shirt in one swift movement. His back being turned to her makes her somewhat safe – in one sense of the word – but if she were to start climbing down now it’d surely draw attention. For the first time in the day she’s invisible to him, and to throw that away at the sight of some skin would be a terrible waste.

Yet when he drops his trousers a moment later, hanging them on a peg alongside his shirt, she seriously considers bolting. He steps under the water facing the wall, following a routine so hard-
worn that the grooves of his footsteps could be marked over the broken tile floor. A channel of water running between shoulder blades provokes a thought that for as much as his age shows in his body, so too does the condition it’s in – due, no doubt, to the continuing years of a physically demanding lifestyle. What happens to it thereafter sets into motion the violent thought that she doesn’t have to keep looking.

But that would be letting down my guard, a voice chimes in that while her own, could have been penned by a true assassin. So she keeps her eyes on him – on his head, the only place she needs to look, as he scrubs himself with practiced efficiency unbeknownst to her spying.

She’s well aware that if he turned around and noticed her it’d put her in a very awkward position, but at this stage if she tries to flee and gets caught then she can’t even claim to be taking on his lessons seriously. This is exactly the reason she shies away from using these facilities, fearful that he’d do the same in her position, though this was no time for turning over such stones and his lack of such suspicion may be the only thing keeping her from discovery.

Thankfully the bucket of water isn’t infinite, and after a period that probably only feels like an age Daud reaches for his clothes and redresses, strolling back out of sight without catching the right angle to notice her. She times her breath to his footsteps as they pick up again, slipped into the sandals that scuff the worn dirt path back to the house.

She waits until she’s absolutely certain he’s gone before she climbs back down, by which point she’s had plenty of time to etch the images irrevocably in her mind.

Emily wakes up with surprise that can only mean accidental sleep, turning fitfully to find herself inhaling a chest full of dust off the ground. She must have dozed off behind the far wall of the garden, slouching along a patch of shade that’s been pulled long across the ground, only to be roused by a sound so peculiar she’d have to hear it again to be sure it’s real.

“Emily!” It repeats, and the voice is unmistakably Daud’s, so she sits up rubbing sleep from her eyes. His calling her name like a dog for the hunt is an unprecedented move, and she doesn’t answer at first, curious as to what he’s playing at. Rather than interpreting his not finding her as a compliment, she suspects it speaks more to the fact that he wasn’t looking very hard – given she was apparently asleep on the ground for the rest of the afternoon. “… You win, if that’s what you’re waiting for,” his call continues, and if she hadn’t just woken up she’d be certain she’s still dreaming.

“What?” she calls back, and then a moment later he blinks into the background around the edge of the wall with arms characteristically crossed.

“Dinner’s ready,” he announces, watching with a piercing eye as she gets up and walks closer, coming to his conclusion as she gets close enough to register the intensity of his focus. “Were you asleep?”

“What if I was?” she retorts with the certainty that it’s completely obvious, and doesn’t stop as she passes him on the lightly-worn path back to the house. She ruminates over possible explanations for his unexpected defeat – or, more accurately, why he would bother to concede simply to call her to dinner. It could be a simple response to yesterday’s politics around the evening meal, or something more personal – like preferring to have the company. Her yawning stomach is grateful for the reminder regardless.
She serves herself from the pot hanging over a dying fire and sits down at the table, watching him lay out a customary jug of water and leftover bread before serving himself. When he slides onto the bench directly across from her, suggestion falls to the more sociable answers – he sits further away when he doesn’t care to talk.

“Now then,” she begins the ball rolling with confidence, “What was this about my winning our wager?”

“Wasting no time, I see,” he comments with subtle warmth, confirming all her speculation, but has to begrudge her a clean victory as he adds, “Even if you dozed across the finish line.” Starting shots fired, she descends like a hawk.

“Even asleep I managed to escape you,” she retorts. “Are you sure I’ve been sent to the right master?” It’s a slip of the tongue, driving her jab the wrong way as she outs herself as thinking of him as any kind of teacher.

“That’s what I get for going easy on you,” he remarks wryly.

“What does that mean?” she seizes at once.

“You only had to deal with fruit,” he explains calmly.

“Implying what exactly?” she presses. “Don’t tell me you’ve been,” she leans back for dramatic emphasis, “deviating from the programme?”

“Modifying,” he counters flatly. “I can’t recreate all the conditions.”

“Besides not actually training me to be an assassin?” she remarks aloofly, but pounces on his suggestion while it’s still got a pulse. “What other exceptions have I been granted?”

“At this stage you’d get darted,” he retorts.

“Darted?” she echoes. “You don’t mean…?”

“Sleeping draught,” he supplies like she could mean anything else.

“You went around sleep darting your own men?” she surmises with a markedly more realistic gasp.

“Better me than someone else,” he replies like that makes it somehow any better. “I usually diluted it... at first.”

“Oh, then by all means feel at liberty to drug your bodyguards,” she satirises.

“Not bodyguards,” he interjects before she makes the mistake of thinking they’re alike enough for comparisons, “and men with no tolerance to the draught are of little use to me.”

“Tolerance?” she queries. “I thought the Outsider saw to that.” She likes the flicker of recognition in her face as she recites things an unmarked like her shouldn’t know. Her father must have consumed enough poison to kill the entire staff of the tower several times over, and it certainly wasn’t the ‘strength of his constitution’ that did it – in spite of his best efforts to convince people otherwise.

“Rely not on fickle gifts,” he comes back in a stony cadence.

“So, just to clarify,” she says, choosing not to probe that wasps’ nest of a tone for now. “You’ve
been ‘going easy’ on me by not shooting me with sleep darts all day.”

“Hm,” he murmurs in lieu of proper confirmation.

“Well,” she remarks, seeing an opportunity to turn the situation on its head – after having the upper hand for most of the day, she wouldn’t mind putting him in an uncomfortable spot this time. “That won’t do.”

“What?” he fixes curiously.

“The point of your so-called programme is equivalence,” she says, “to know what they’ve gone through, remember?”

“Yes. Your point?” he turns back, flipping the exchange like a sand-timer.

“I should get the full experience.”

“That’s not something I can arrange,” he remarks calmly.

“But I can,” she supplies, and he gives the quizzical tilt of his head that tells her she’s got him on the line. “I brought some with me.” The intensity of his bemusement increases.

“You packed sleep darts?” he says incredulously, but she did – and not a goddam stitch to wear.

“I didn’t know what to expect,” she replies. “Only a few, but you’ll dilute it, I suppose.”

“I’m not drugging you,” he says like it needs saying.

“Yes you are,” she retorts with a surge of assertiveness. “You said it builds tolerance, so I might as well experience it in a safe environment first.” She dares to touch the nerve of calling this – being here, with him, safe – and hopes it twists him up just as much as it does her to acknowledge.

“… I don’t think it’s what Corvo had in mind,” he replies stiffly, but that it’s all he can say tells her more than enough.

“Corvo isn’t here,” she replies firmly, like they hadn’t already been going at each other out of spite and childish games, spilling blood and snapping suggestive things at one another in a way that would’ve driven her father to his wits’ end several times over. “I’ll get them after dinner.”

He gives her a look that comes across exasperated, but his silence speaks volumes as he turns back to his food. Perhaps he’s saving the fight for later, she reasons – or maybe he sees the sense in what she’s saying.

“You were going to answer three questions,” she pipes up when the quiet can’t stretch any longer without becoming uncomfortable, and when he doesn’t reply right away starts prompting with a worrying habit of familiarity. “Daud?”

“What?” he returns churlishly. “Ask your damn questions if you must, I won’t argue with you.”

She contemplates how strange it is that those five words could spell so much trouble for her: I won’t argue with you. Mostly because she and the alternatives have yet to truly start getting along.

“When did you know it was wrong?” she delivers her first carefully curated request.
“Know what?” he demands, and it’s somehow outraging that she even has to say – although she still relishes reminding him.

“Killing my mother,” she answers, and his face is rolling stormclouds.

“Always,” he supplies quicker than she expects. “I did the work anyway.” Conversations they’ve already had, and not what she wants to know.

“That’s not what I mean,” she contests. “When did it matter?” She’s still not convinced she has the right words, but hopes he’ll understand what she’s trying to convey. He’s made it clear enough that moment was the point of departure that ultimately brought him here, yet is trying not to tell her why. “We had a wager,” she tumbles over herself to say in the unbearable pause that follows, entreating him to play by the rules they devised like they could actually mean something.

“… When I was washing away her blood,” he answers with eyes so lowered she can’t meet his gaze, then without prompting continues spilling like a nicked vein. “It was like… something broke. I knew it was different.”

“Different how?” she presses – fast running out of questions, but she has to know.

He meets her eyes with the look of someone without anything left to offer except the grim truth – which strangely enough, she believes – and answers, “It was the last.”

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to get this one out before the holidays if I could as a special gift to everyone (Dignifiedrice I'm looking at you) who wondered why the heck any sane author would spend so much time writing about a shower...

Also 1-2/3 of Emily's questions down already, only 'one' to go, though going by our Lady's propensity for bending the rules one can expect her to pitch for more than she's meant to be getting ;)

All the stuff about sleep darts is basically made up off the back of me remembering that Daud's trash children took more than a dart to fall asleep in the first game - that and the amusement it gave me to imagine him 'training' his Whalers by shooting them with baby-strength sleep darts all over the Flooded District until they learned (or drowned).

Happy holidays to all readers, and assuming I'm not inspired to update before NYE possibly a happy new year as well! Down with 2016!!!
The Twenty-Second Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily likes asking questions she’s best off not knowing the answers to.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year one-and-all! I was in some full on mountains hiking last week which did interrupt the update schedule as anticipated, but I hope everyone had enjoyable holidays seasons and so on and so on.

Now we return to our regularly scheduled trash ship voyage, starring Emily 'I've never had a bad idea in my life' Kaldwin and the Stalest Cinnamon Roll Daud.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The truly unique nature of the logic that puts Emily in this position only strikes when Daud stands at her back touching the end of a sleep dart to her neck. Right up until this point she was fully convinced this was a triumphant victory of her will over his, but warm hands on her skin as he rubbed it with alcohol and the precision with which he holds the point of the needle in place is suddenly, powerfully telling her otherwise.

“You sure about this?” he murmurs as if he’s put an ear to her like a seashell and heard the ocean of worries in her chest, but like hell if she’s going to back out now. It was a task enough getting him to cede to her perfectly rational – at the time – logic in the first place; to at least experience the effects of sleep darts in a controlled environment, something her definitively overprotective father had never allowed, so to buckle at the last moment would be a shame she’d never live down.

“Of course,” she says lightly. “Worst case I take another nap, try not to lose me this time-ow!” He sticks her right at the moment of distraction, and she’s sure she the immediate rush to her head is entirely of her own invention.

Then it comes over her, a falling wave of disorientation that begs the conscious mind to shut off. She steers through the storm, keeping focused on the lights flicking from the lanterns under the terrace, counting each breath in and out.

“Feel that?” he asks, still behind her, and the texture in his voice is reminiscent of calloused fingertips over skin. Something he’s done plenty of times, caught between clashes and the casual intimacy of this would-be learning experience – but nothing quite like she imagines now.

“Just about,” she answers faintly, turning round to face him with a potentially obvious fake smile. The effect wasn’t completely dissimilar to being drunk, and she’d endured more than enough lengthy state functions to be able to handle her liquor. “This isn’t so bad.” His mouth twitches in the inkling of a smile, and he holds up his hands in front of her like a sparring partner, gesturing towards his right palm with a tip of his head.

“Think you can knock me one right here?” he invites as if he’s entertaining some princess in the training yard, and not a person who’s thrown everything but the kitchen sink at him at some point
or another. He’d never get away with talking like this to her if her wits were sharp, but right now they’re anything but – maybe he knows that – and she responds to the instruction by driving a woozy fist into the pad of his palm, like the habit of doing what he tells her to is finally starting to catch on.

“Good,” he purrs with just enough give in his arm to offer satisfaction without detracting from the fact that he’s clearly humouring her. She aims the next swing at his chin in retaliation, and though he dodges her fist with room to spare, the look on his face is entirely caught out.

He holds still for a moment, then his free hand flashes to her side and delivers a retaliatory prod in the ribs. The dose has her reactions wired all wrong, because rather than any sensible response the contact makes her jump and come back down boneless. She's plummeting jelly-legged for the floor when he catches her, fingers splayed across the small of her back as he takes the weight of her on one arm like she’s nothing compared to full basket of peaches.

She comes to a stop with arms awkwardly flailing, finishing in a pose closer to dancing than combat; while she was being contrary more than anything when she reminded Daud that her father isn't here, it’s times like these – the way he looks at her inadvertently dipped on his arm – that makes her think there’s things Corvo is just better off not seeing.

“How did you get it?” she asks with a tongue that can’t manage anything except uncomfortably sincere.

“Walk to the end and back,” he instructs as he sets her carefully back on her feet, and she pulls a disapproving face, which he seems content to ignore. “Then I’ll tell you.”

He drives a hard bargain, but she’s not sure how many questions she’s got left, so concedes to the peculiarly challenging field of putting one foot in front of the other without somehow seeming to slope in the wrong direction. She eventually reaches the far end of the patio, where the land runs off into pitch black – no light in the sky tonight bar the sliver of a waxing moon.

“Move with the feeling, not against it,” he calls across the terrace to her, and advice like that could be his most dangerous lesson yet.

Yet as she comes back, swimming alongside the current rather than into it, she begins feeling more at home – if she laid down she’d surely fall asleep in moments, but discovers that she can glide downstream without letting her head go under. Midway on the return she hits an eddy, and for reasons difficult to articulate – perhaps just to see if she can – throws her hands to the ground and turns a cartwheel, palms meeting the floor as her legs sail elegantly over her head. However, she comes up rightsided with so much momentum she can’t stop herself, flipping backwards with ingrained muscle-memory and landing alarmingly close to the wall of the house.

This elicits an alarmed huff from Daud, followed by a grumbling of something that sounds like, “Showoff,” from over by the table, where he’s wisely settled away from her irregular tumbling. Her spinning head is advising her not to try further acrobatics, so she channels her attention to her
“Reward.”

“Scar,” she demands with a swaying outstretched finger, following up with, “Story,” lest he require any further explanation.

“Oh, you remembered,” he remarks like he’s impressed – though not exactly pleased – and she contemplates the possible scenarios that could come out of hitting him as he works on his answer. Like disjointed words have become their new conversation, he issues a simple statement to the effect of, “Fishing hook.”

All she can offer as a response is, “What?”

“Avoid quarrels with dock workers,” he advises, raising an eyebrow that isn’t pinned down by the aforementioned scar.

“Someone you were paid to kill?” she asks, because she discarded any sensibility with the larger part of her rationale the moment she engaged in this mad experiment.

“No,” he replies, hardening to interrogation. “Someone I decided to.”

While she’d bartered for questions knowing it was a way to lock-pick his stubborn tongue, which if jimmied correctly could spill subversive truths one after the other like a busted safe – she’d somehow overlooked that she might not always like the answer. Yet she can imagine most people’s reaction to having that done to their face with fishing hook of all things is unlikely to be restrained, and suspects she’d be much tempted to a gory revenge herself.

It’s not something she wants to think about – the Knife of Dunwall, hacking a bloody streak through the city – especially looking at him now and knowing he wouldn’t snap the neck of so much as a rabbit. One extreme to counterbalance the other, but piling weights onto both ends of a scale until they levelled out only made the burden that much heavier.

“So after intoxicating someone thusly,” she recites like a raconteur, hit with the sudden impetus to lighten the mood, winding her way over to the table to lay her hands square along its end; a welcome support in addition to her own unpredictable legs. “The game of hide and seek continues, no?”

“No,” Daud issues sternly.

“Why not?” she retorts somewhere between playful and petulant.

“Because I’ve no desire to spend the night looking for you fast asleep in the dirt,” he replies tersely, and even in this state she can agree that’s probably sensible, though it was worth asking for his biting reaction alone. “And you already won, remember?” he sweetens.

“Hm,” she murmurs approvingly, slumping down onto one of the benches. “That’s true.”

“You picked it up better than I expected,” he remarks like he’s any precedent of issuing compliments, but as she lolls back on the table his tone turns curt again. “Sit up or you’ll fall asleep.”

She gives a protestant moan and pulls herself back upright. It’s a peculiar sensation, more of the body than the mind, but the temptation to let the draught win is insidious.

“It’s a game for children,” she remarks, lolling over a crooked knee and raising a finger that moves through the air like the conductor of a drunk orchestra. “Of which you’re dealing with a seasoned
player.” Better than he knew, still blithely ignorant to what she’d seen earlier that day. Flashes of her memories of him… disrobed, to put it politely, bring a flush to her face that she blames on her addled senses.

“Not much of a game for an Empress,” he comments like he can detect her disreputable thoughts, and it’s unusual for him to pick on her title when it’s often the first thing out the door.

“Thas’ why I liked it,” she replies sluggishly, stretching like a cat and only noticing after she relaxes that his eyes are bolted to her. “Certain events in my past conspired t’make me a somewhat difficult child,” she adds cheekily, only setting up self-deprecation for the chance to yank her favourite bellrope once more.

“I can imagine,” he answers with careful reserve as he paces across the terrace, knowing all too well his part in the formation of her emotional baggage. Of course, she lost her mother so young, her so-called loyalists would whisper behind closed doors at court, or discuss in the privacy of their stately homes, remarkably well-balanced, all things considered – after what the poor thing went through.

“Corvo once told me he’d start nailing my feet to the floor if I didn’t stop hiding from my tutors,” she relates fondly. “All’n vain, of course.” Dunwall tower was a proverbial playground of places for a precocious child to hide. Northing worked; not locked doors, constant supervision or threats and rewards alike. Only her father could bring her back – most of the time – and her hiding places became ever more elaborate, drawing him into games not entirely unlike the ones she and Daud play now.

“That’s good,” he comments on a tangent she can’t follow, drawing her out of the daze to look at him in question. He’s on his feet, resting against one of the columns of the terrace, walled in by dried greenery that rustles as he adjusts his position.

“Wha?” she issues limply, tipping her head to one side and seeing if it makes any difference to the picture he makes. Where’s Sokolov when you need him, she thinks idly to herself; last she’d heard he too had fled down here to pursue some wild new project – a trend that was catching on, perhaps.

“Being able to disappear, especially around those who know you well,” he explains.

“If I started playing hide n’ seek with my staff again…” she starts to say, but the imagery is too amusing and she breaks into a chuckle, putting a hand to her mouth like she has to conceal the evidence. “I think poor Callista would retire on the spot,” she issues from behind her fingers.

“It could save your life,” he replies all too seriously, and she pouts, wondering if he can spare her the morbidity for once.

She drapes herself along the top of the table, face to the woodgrain watching him at ninety degrees and queries, “Is this all there is to it?” without lifting her head.

“Sit up,” he reminds more than he orders, so she lifts up her head and drops it in her hands. “All there is to what?”

“The dose,” she explains. “I’ve been more intoxicated at state functions.” State-coverup drunk, as it’d become known; such occasions would send her advisors into a frenetic display. Daud gives a half-muffled laugh and picks himself up off the post.

“Think you can handle something more challenging?” he proposes, an alluring smirk making a rare appearance on his face.
“Try me,” she invites more boldly than she perhaps should, stacking herself back over her feet as she wobbles up from the table.

“Very well,” he announces with a sudden breeze of foreboding. “We’ll do some drills.”

Her wail can probably be heard across the whole grounds.

The effect of the sleeping draught is more persistent than Emily imagined, and staggering through what feels like an age of Daud’s drills doesn’t provide any improvement on her hand to eye coordination, though she manages everything he asks her to do – eventually.

“How long is it going to be like this?” she questions when he finally lets her off the hook of a particularly annoying figure, the timbre of his goods changing from unrelenting to content.

“Is what?” he enquires, not following conversation that flits around as unevenly as her footwork and swordplay have – that he dared to put a weapon in her hand at all is impressive, but she did insist rather firmly, and he’s knocked it out of her grip more times than she has the consciousness to count. His ability to disarm her in a heartbeat would be infuriating if she didn’t have the intoxication to account for; but they both know – she hopes – that he’d never get away with it if she were sober.

“Feeling like…” she begins, holding up her hands and looking at each as she turns them over. She’s scraped her knuckles several times, along with scratches and nicks gained over these past days – when she was hurtling up trees like her life depended on it, or letting him cut into her arm for the sake of winning a duel.

“We can call it a night,” he offers with his brand of frustrating compliance, though she's too worn out to find an angle to argue about.

“Perhaps,” she murmurs, rubbing her eyes. “I’m a little tired.”

He snorts, the irony not lost on either of them.

“Then enough,” he settles, folding his arms. “You did well,” he admits unexpectedly, but rather than confront the sincerity she drops into a mockery of a bow so low it unbalances her, tipping forward and stumbling onto her hands. “Are you going to make it upstairs?” he teases – or he better be.

“Course,” she slurs. “M’fine.” That she can barely walk in a straight line past him somewhat undermines her point, but he doesn’t move, holding still as a statue as he lets her weave past him. Her lop-sided trajectory across the kitchen betrays her, pots and pans clattering from their holdings on the wall as she bumps into them unwittingly, and she turns to see him cut out in the doorway, hands on his hips.

“You all right?” he calls with softness that goes against everything she wants to believe about him, but can’t lie to herself and deny.

“I…” she starts, staggering for the table to provide balance she’s apparently unable to muster for herself. “S’it getting stronger?”

“Ah,” he murmurs like he’s got her under a lens. “In a sense.”
“Mmh?” she fails to form words even though her mind is still running, but he seems to understand her.

“The draught is designed to put people under and keep them there,” he explains as he crosses over to her, the shuffle of his sandals over swept tiles and sinuous clanks as he puts back what she knocked down. “Building tolerance lets you resist longer, but sooner or later it takes its due.”

“Oh,” she hums, feeling like she’s being dragged down into inevitable darkness. It’s not harmful, she has to remind herself, and she saw how little Daud loaded into the dart – even argued about increasing the amount, only to be flatly refused. She deeply resents feeling like anyone knows what’s better for her than she does, but is quietly grateful for his stubbornness on that occasion.

“Emily?” he names just as his hand comes down on the back of her shoulder - she was so focused on staying awake she didn't notice him come up to her - and her stomach gives a tell-tale lurch. There’s something remarkable about the way he says it this time; as if it’s the first, even though it’s not.

“Yes?” she answers breathily, acutely aware of the pressure of his hand on her back. She wants to tell herself that they don’t usually touch like this, or out of anything except antagonism, but knows it’s wholly untrue.

“Do you need help getting to your room?” he offers, and being so lost in the waves crashing over her makes things sound like something they’re not.

“No,” she replies automatically, returning to her schooling in the proper conduct of an Empress; however, knowing she’s not getting out of the kitchen on her own two feet alone, adds a mumbling, “but you can… see me to the stairs.” Not even making a snide comment, he simply offers her an arm like he’s every bit the gentry she knows he’s far from.

Hauling herself up with a firm grip on the immovable rail of his forearm and holding on like her life depends on it, he moves with her as if pure coincidence takes them down the hallway together, coming to stop at the foot of the stairs where the illusion has to end, because they’re not wide enough for two people.

She takes her hand off him with a small, mostly-fumbled acknowledgement and lays it on the wall, finding the off-white plaster a poor comparison as she hikes herself up the first step. Wobbling, she adjusts her hand and gets up another, but by the third leaves her head behind her feet and ends up falling back the way she came, yet hands span the width of her shoulders as he catches her without question, moving up the steps behind her to set her upright.

“You do that on purpose?” he suggests with the amusing notion that she’s got the capacity at this point to test him, and she shakes her head. “Sure you don’t want help to your room?” he offers again, and her head shaking only increases in vigour. “If you do it again, I’ll drop you,” he dangles, betting her ego against her.

“I… need help,” she relents awkwardly, perfectly eloquent sentences in her head falling apart as soon as it comes to translating them into speech. Except he doesn’t do anything more than sigh, one of his hands remaining affixed to back of her shoulder while the other scoops up her legs in a movement that seems effortless from where she’s sitting, which is soon right in his arms.

As yet again she finds herself incapacitated and having to accept his help like it’s natural, just as before as much of blame lies with herself as him – it was his programme, but her madcap idea to make it work out here. Though last time she hadn’t let him bring her up this astonishingly narrow staircase, and as he ascends the cramped walkway it forces them closer together than she thinks
he’d allow under other circumstances, which does give her another opportunity to examine his face up close once more, poised eye-to-eye with his scar finally knowing the story behind it.

Although, she’s been even closer before; felt the hardened tissue against her cheek, and remembers with a rush - like it couldn’t have actually happened – exactly how close they’ve really been. What he said to make her stop.

He gets to the top of the stairs and turns with a certainty that doesn’t disguise his knowing exactly which room she sleeps in, and as they reach the doorway she leans back to meet his eyes.

“Daud,” she entreats with new clarity, like she’s been jolted out of the fugue to ask one last question. “What did you mean?”

The power of his sceptical look is compelling, but even though they’re back on level ground he’s yet to put her down, and she’s learned in this life to take nothing as coincidence.

“What?” he says simply, which she feels from his chest more than she hears in her ears. She’s never seen him smoke, but smells something from her window in the evenings occasionally that could be drifting out of his, and with a rasp like that she finds it hard to believe he’s never indulged.

“When you said that not liking… it wasn’t the problem,” she skips over things that even an intoxicated, limp-legged her can’t quite admit to; but if what he said back then holds any meaning, he won’t need reminding.

He gives her one of his trademark indecipherable looks, though in this light she thinks it might not be so cryptic after all. When he leans in very slightly her heart and stomach feel like they’ve swapped places, and for a moment she thinks he’s going to do what she did to him – or used to, before he told her he’d rather she didn’t.

“You’re all out of questions,” he delivers dangerously close to her open mouth, then sets her on her feet and brings some sorely neglected space between them. One hand remains behind her to open the door, the air between them electrified, and a rush of heat wafts out of the room that she can use to rationalise the glow in her cheeks as he concludes, “Goodnight,” and leaves her to confusion and shaking legs.

She staggers into bed with even more questions than she started the night with, and is asleep by the time she hits the pillow.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took a lot out of me, and I had my routine crisis of thinking it's no good, but... yeah... I'm cool with it now. Editing is vile work but makes a lot of difference, so hope people enjoy this particularly UST-ey update. Happy new year, I guess?

All stuff about the sleep darts is entirely of my own invention, but I speculated they're nothing more complex than a sedative, which a lot of sedatives in our real world (especially ones for sleep) are naturally tolerance building so there's a vague enough connection for me to go on.
Besides this whole debacle was strictly Emily's idea *holds up hands guiltlessly* and what's a good trash ship without the obligatory intoxicated episode???
Emily wakes up feeling like she’s been out for decades, a mouthful of desert and cracked lips as she comes to gasping and broiling in sweat inside her inferno of a room. She’s slept far later than usual, knocked out past the point when the heat would’ve normally roused her, and pays dearly for it as she staggers bleary-eyed into the hallway amid flashbacks of the previous evening.

Yet again she’d ended up indisposed to Daud in exactly the wrong way. It’s somehow harder to stomach drawing out the softer side of him, being humoured and carried to bed like an overtired child when she much prefers to scrap and flick sparks at his fuse.

Worse yet - the throbbing in her head subsiding with the change in temperature as she makes it downstairs - there was an undeniable moment last night when she’d actually thought he was going to kiss her… albeit she was drugged at the time, but that the notion could even occur sends shivers to every extremity.

Head still reeling and without concern for anything except finding some relief, she weaves outside on weak legs and pads barefoot to the washing area still dressed in her nightclothes. Pumping a bucket full of water and carrying it to the shower, she scales the brickwork in a half-awake daze and reaches up to tip it into the rig, dropping the empty to clatter against cracked clay slabs that would’ve once been an internal floor as she steps under the water.

It hits like the rain she’s been missing, standing with eyes closed and face turned upwards into the stream. Her meditation is rudely interrupted by the shower ending, so with a few impertinent huffs she refills the discarded bucket and repeats the cycle several more times, not stopping until she’s fully satisfied. There’s a few moments when she needs to stifle flashes of the memory of Daud in similar positions – less some clothes – but aside from those minor upsets she manages to clear her head.

She peels sodden fabric from wet skin as she walks back to the house, wringing out the water so it doesn’t cling in a way that makes her feel as good as naked. Fortunately there’s little sign of Daud about the place; he makes himself scarce after their… altercations with such regularity that she’s
started taking it for granted, and by the time she’s made herself coffee she’s feeling much more human.

She heads back up to her room, inadvertently retracing his steps – and her actions – with a heat in her skin that she writes off to the weather. She hasn’t the faintest idea what possessed her to say or do any of those things, and even her curiosity is a puzzle in itself, assaulting him with questions whose answer couldn’t be anything good – why is it so important for her to push and pull him to his limits, tearing the past out of him like gutting a fish?

She changes into clothing that accords her slightly more modesty for far less comfort, and without really knowing why – to see what happens, she supposes – sets out to look for him.

She locates Daud at the very edge of his land, shaded under the brim of his hat as he sits on the ground slotting stones into a tumbledown boundary wall.

“Feeling better?” he calls out long before she’s close enough to consider breaking the silence herself. She half-heartedly tried to be quiet in her approach, but the air is still and crisp debris covering the sun-baked earth make it too challenging to be worth a real attempt.

“Yes,” she answers for lack of anything better to say, drifting over to the nearest patch of shade out of sheer necessity. He doesn’t add anything further so neither does she, settling against the trunk of a pear tree to watch him take apart and rebuild the wall stone by irregular stone.

“Aren’t you going to ask about the programme?” he says after a while, snapping her out of the haze that watching the peculiarly satisfying process lulls her into. He uses no mortar, simply the art of fitting random shapes together in a way that holds strong – something she suspects he’s gifted at.

“Dare I?” she replies lazily, not sure she’s of a mind for lessons just yet.

“You were insistent on it before,” he remarks rather belligerently, though probably no moreso than when she was when arguing him into drugging her.

“Go on, then,” she bites. “What’s next?” If keeping to the ‘programme’ and pretending the things going on within its blurrily defined remit aren’t worth discussing is how he’s going to play this, then she’s not arguing – it’s certainly easier than addressing anything else that happened in the evening.

“For the next challenge, you have to convince me you’re someone you’re not,” he delivers over his work, which continues unabated by the divergence into a lecture.

“What does that mean?”

“Hiding in plain sight,” he states like that’s supposed to make any more sense.

“Which I’m meant to achieve how?” she scathes, not entirely convinced he isn’t making up these exercises just like his lessons.

He sighs. “Use body language and anything else at your disposal to make me think you’re someone you’re not.” He might just as well ask her to make peace with her mother's death.

She scoffs at such an incredible proposal, which clearly displeases him, and queries, “How can I convince you I’m someone else if I’m the only person for hundreds of miles?” It catches him out
enough to pause in his work as he considers the conundrum.

“I’ll grant you that,” he remarks over the resumed chink of stone on stone, “but show me you can move like anything except an Empress for long enough to make me look twice and you pass.” He casts a quick look over his shoulder that doesn’t rise any higher than her knees, and she finds herself put out that he won’t meet her eye to eye – not something he’s had a problem with before. “If I were you, I’d start with your footwork.”

She bristles as he recites one of the most loathed words in her vocabulary, heaving a sigh that finally manages to draw a proper look out of him – the first of the day. Flashes of her fingers on his face need to be proverbially beaten down as she returns the stone-cold stare, and she’s grateful for once that the heat already has her flushed.

“Problem?” he challenges defiantly, and she finds herself wishing he couldn’t read her quite so well as she quickly looks away. The issue with these blades was they cut both ways, and just as she’s unfurling him like a parchment to be rolled out without cracking, so too is he appearing to learn her like a manuscript.

“Nothing, just the bane of my existence,” she replies lightly. His chuckle hits the pit of her stomach, not sure whether she was trying to make him laugh.

“Assassins need quiet feet,” he remarks easily, but it’s one of the lessons her father has worn out like a pair of old shoes; she could’ve stayed home to be lectured on the importance of footwork.

“I’ve crept up on you before,” she contests, sidling over to the reconstructed wall and giving him a wry look along it as she tests his craftsmanship against her weight – it holds true, of course. The glance he returns is as carefully measured as if he’s using cups to portion out the right balance of exasperation and amusement.

“You got lucky,” he decrees with eyes soon returning to his handiwork, and it’s infuriating that he thinks he can call these things seemingly as he pleases. She’d ask him just how much of a fluke it was when she was watching him shower, if such an admission wouldn’t make her expire from embarrassment.

“Without walking just above the ground, I don’t know how you expect me to be any quieter,” she retorts, watching as he methodically unpiles stones from the tumble-down side of the wall to reassemble on the other, moving along the boundary at a snail’s pace.

“I’m not asking for quiet,” he explains. “The problem is you strolling around like an Empress all the time,” he tosses out the comment carelessly but it lands like a dart – which she’s had more than enough of at this stage.

“I am an Empress.”

“That’s not something you want people to know just by looking at you,” he fires like she’s target practice for the day.

“Plenty of people have seen me without knowing who I am,” she finds herself defending.

“Not ones who were paying attention,” he says lowly, “and you cover your face, I assume because you give yourself away otherwise.” She almost bites her tongue to stop herself spitting that how she protects her identity is none of his damn business, but it’s far too hot for an aggravated argument, so she keeps her head on her shoulders.

“Your whalers wear disguises,” she delivers frostily, and there’s a creasing around his eyes that
suggests her choice of words have had the desired effect. Though it’s been many long years, the people he trained are still his, and she’ll be damned if he doesn’t lay claim to them.

“Not when they need to blend in,” he replies uncomfortably. She could keep at him along the same lines, but knows that he didn’t bother with masks in his heyday – and how little it stunted him professionally. Anyone who saw his face knew their card was up.

“I thought this was a lesson about footwork?” she prompts instead, changing the direction of the conversation before it’s too far gone to return to.

“That’s where it starts,” he answers cryptically. “Being invisible is more than hiding from sight and sound, sooner or later you’ll need to pass under someone’s nose without being noticed.”

“Isn’t that what your gifts from the Outsider are for?”

“Not always,” he maintains. “Rely not on—”

“Fickle gifts,” she huffs. “Yes, I remember.”

“Besides, it’s simpler than that,” he continues. “People identify themselves by the way they move, change that and you change the way they see you.”

“So I move like an Empress?” she poses facetiously.

“Constantly,” he rips. “I could pick you out of a crowd on the sound of your footsteps.” She doesn’t doubt it, though his accusatory tone doesn’t give her any fondness for the claim.

“You’re one to talk,” she combats with a flick of her eyes toward his sandaled feet.

“I’m teaching the programme, not taking it,” he replies calmly. It also went without saying that the moment he stepped out of those shoes he might as well be carried on the wind.

“Oh, the programme,” she mocks with a faux-inviting twirl of her hand. “Then by all means, please proceed.”

“Striding around like you’re leading a parade draws notice,” he mutters, casting a dour glance over his shoulder at the boots she’s stopped bothering to lace up, stuffing her feet in and out of them as she needs. “Whether you desire it or not.”

“That’s absurd,” she insists. “I walk like anyone else does.”

“Of high-born blood,” he retorts, trailing his eyes into an up and down of her that makes heat prickle on the back of her neck before adding, “At a push.” She understands the point he’s getting at, that posture and gait could tell you as much about a person as their words, but only he could make an entirely natural disposition come across so negative.

“That’s absurd,” she insists. “I walk like anyone else does.”

“Who should I walk like, then?” she asks a little cattily.

“Anyone else,” he replies like a snapping dog. “That’s the challenge.”

“Well, what did the others have to do?” she demands, watching him turn back to the wall with an over-wound watchspring’s worth of tension in his jaw.

“The same,” he murmurs stiffly. He doesn’t appear to like talking about the people he contrived this wretched programme for today, so it’s naturally the only thing that interests her.
“For how long?” she presses.

“Long enough to do their job,” he bites, and she knows what that means without further interrogation, though he adds in a way he clearly begrudges, “Most needed to learn how to look like they belonged in the hallways of power instead of a gutter outside it.”

“In which case, I’m already equipped,” she points out.

“You need to learn how to fade into the background,” he counters. “If anything it’s the harder part.”

“Good,” she remarks in a passable impression of his own disenchanted affirmation. “Your leniency is neither invited nor appreciated.” He doesn’t turn to give her a scolding look like the comment is meant to incite, which she knows because she’s waiting for it with bated breath, burning a resentful hole in his back.

“The low-born have an advantage,” he steams doggedly onwards, denying her the satisfaction of a rise as he slams stones down ever so-slightly more firmly into the wall. “They’re used to keeping their heads down, and most nobles never pay attention to someone who looks like a servant unless they need something.” She scowls, feeling indirectly accused of snobbery.

“Then you do it,” she demands a little crossly, half-convinced this challenge is a mere soapbox for his class politics. “If you’re the master then show me how it’s done.”

He lets out another deep sigh and gets up slowly, far slower than he should, so her first thought when he puts one hand on his back and another on the wall for support to literally haul himself up is that he’s hurt himself. He reaches out an open palm to her, but rather than presenting a surface so firm it could be carved from stone, his whole arm trembles as if he’s afflicted.

“Spare a few coins?” he slurs in a cadence that could’ve been peeled out of the slums of Dunwall last week, tones of his already throaty voice shifted in a way that disarms her more than it should. He’s hunched towards the wall that he feigns at needing to stand, face turned away as if by coincidence. Although they’re stood on the edge of a wide valley, the only two people for hundreds of miles, were they anywhere else she could easily imagine slipping a hand into her jacket pocket to hand out a few coins without ever taking a closer look.

“Not exactly inconspicuous in the hallways of power,” is all she has to offer in a prim cadence, but in an instant he has snapped to attention, giving her a Watchman’s salute with uncanny precision.

“Shall we gather for whiskey and cigars tonight?” he delivers in a way so familiar she flings a hand to her mouth, like slamming a lid on the ungainly laugh that escapes her.

“There have been times I’m convinced they do little else,” she stifles, shaking with silent amusement while Daud breaks the character as easily as he built it, relaxing the stark profile into a shape that’s so recognisably him it’s unnerving.

After spending so long fine-tuning her senses to respond to his every move, and all her intellect to studying him, it’s not something she can switch off easily, continuing read him even as he goes back to reconstructing his wall. Though he put on a hyperbolic performance of getting up, he’s not so easy going down either, a hand resting on the half-assembled stones almost as if he does use it for support as he lowers himself to the ground; signs of his age showing perhaps, for once.

“How did others fool you?” she asks as he resume work, still trying to figure out what he’s really asking of her – and anything she can glean about those before her while she’s at it.
“Too many ways to count,” he replies unyieldingly. “Though... there was a couple of lads who switched places, let me call them by each other’s names,” he reveals with an unexpected lapse into something almost soft enough to be fond.

“You didn’t recognise them by their appearance?” she queries.

“Not under the masks,” he replies knowingly, then continues like she ought to be taking notes, “They adopted each other’s accent, mannerisms – even the way they laughed.” He slows at his work, and she wonders if it’s the thought of novice assassins laughing that strikes him cold as well. “I only figured it out when I caught one sneaking in the other’s girl.”

“Surely you mean theirs,” she corrects while wondering in some vaguely hypocritical back-alley of her mind what kind of women carried on with an assassin.

“I mean what I said,” he retorts, and the source of his mirth becomes more apparent. “I was making an example of him for breaking the rules when the real man started a fight.”

“Oh my,” she exclaims in a way that makes her consider how high-born she must sound. “Was the lady aware of the switch?”

“Acted as if she wasn’t,” he answers like the story hadn’t taken place half a lifetime ago. “Then again, most would. I was so surprised I hardly noticed,” he seems to outright reminisce.

“You?” she dallies with teasing. “I’m not sure I can picture it.”

“Could hardly believe it,” he insists. “They’d been doing each other’s work for months.”

“Months?” she echoes incredibly.

“Easily,” he replies surely. “I was so impressed I think I gave them a weekend off.” Just the one, from the sounds of it, and that does make a frighteningly believable picture – Daud at the command of a unit of assassins he’d recruited and ruthlessly trained, each as fallible and human as they were deadly – though certainly far from comfortable. Even he seems restless as the past crawls too close for either of their comfort, stones no longer fitting against each other in the wall so pleasingly.

“What happened to them?” she asks out of an overly awkward silence. “After you... left.” She could’ve chosen worse words, but doesn't, for whatever reason.

“No idea,” he murmurs, ceasing his building entirely to stare out at the hillside sloping away from them. “Probably still out there.”

It strikes like the chiming of a clock that for as far away as he’s hidden himself - under the pretence of a peaceful life and calm disposition - and in spite of any remorse, pacifism or the handful of mixed apologies he’s given her, the wound Daud put in himself as much as her is still gaping.
CLASS POLITICS: A FANFIC. No really though that dynamic is exactly my kind of filth and I try not to hammer anything in too hard, but Emily's privilege and Daud's comparative lack thereof is something I'm mindful of and take great delight in working into their exchanges where I can. *Hums Uptown Girl vaguely in the background*

Another running theme of writing this story has been me thinking 'HMM what are assassin-type things to learn' and then coming up with ideas and being relieved when somewhere down the line I find some weird pieces of tangential canon evidence that makes sense with them. In this case, the description of Daud as being picked up by 'an actor' as a teenager, as well as the option of going into the Abbey as an Overseer in the DLC - he even riffs with the guards while keeping cover, so I was quite pleased to find some backup for this particular niche of his training.

Oh and I'm super not sorry about the whiskey and cigars line. It's ICONIC.
The Twenty-Fourth Lesson

Chapter Summary

In which Daud gives as good as he gets – and then some.

Chapter Notes

Another week, another update.

I have a complicated relationship with the 'Daud' tag on tumblr, perhaps because of the vast proportion of posts that fly in the face of this beloved trash ship I be sailing... which is neither here nor there, I didn't set upon the pairing or start writing an outrageous story about it for any reason or satisfaction except my own, and 'confirmed asexual' (which imma have to take as being a little more open-ended than 'canon' because... reasons) is definitely better than finding specific hate towards this pairing on the tag, but what I'm really looking for is stale cinnamon roll sitting quietly in the sun fanart... so if anyone has some of that, please point me in its direction.

On which note I'm also often surprised by the number of people who see Daud's 'retirement' as a lot less solitary than I've imagined, where he's chilling in Karnaca or on a beach or something but is still integrated with society. That might say more about me than anything else, heh.

Anyway, enjoy the new chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emily Kaldwin is no stranger to seemingly impossible tasks – finding a cure for deadly plague, growing into a throne several sizes too large for any child, coming to a shaky understanding with her mother’s murderer – but an afternoon of puzzling Daud’s latest challenge in what is proving to be crushingly intense heat has led her towards ill tempers. While the weather has been relentless throughout her time here, today is hot even by this place’s standards.

She left Daud to his drywall long ago, opting to lay in the shade and contemplate his task from a more theoretical, horizontal point of view. If he wants her to convince him that she’s someone she’s not, she has to first decide which of the many things she isn’t to imitate.

Perhaps someone who shows him respect, she thinks cheekily, grinning to herself as she lolls across one of the benches at the outside table. While that doesn’t quite fit the bill, it does give her an idea, so she waits in anticipation of the characteristic flapping of his sandals before dashing inside and gathering her wits.

She stands just inside the kitchen with a poker for a spine and deep revulsion for how nervous such a silly trial is making her, but swallows her doubts as she holds herself to the shape of a fearsome friend and steps through the doorway in time with his arrival on the terrace. He’s emptying a carrier of vegetables from the garden onto the table with taut forearms, which is as good an
opportunity as any, and she recites a line she’s heard a thousand times before.

“Will you be taking lunch today?” He glances up at her and for a moment she’s furious, because there’s no way she’s ever going to convince him of something so absurd as being anything like Calista, but to her surprise his expression doesn’t so much as flicker as he answers.

“Not yet,” he delivers almost routinely, preserving the fantasy for some reason she can’t conceive. “Could do with a coffee, though,” he latches on the end, casting a look like he’s throwing marbles to knock hers out of their sketchily drawn arena. She narrows her eyes at him, but he’s not looking anymore; they both know there’s only two ways she can go from this point, and if she doesn’t choose the decision will be made for her.

“Yes Daud,” she forces, then retreats to the kitchen wondering what in the world has gotten into him. With some reluctance she sets about brewing some coffee, a trivially annoying task that she’s usually only prepared to do once in a day – for herself – and only then in the rare case that he hasn’t already made enough for her, which he almost always does.

Perhaps this is his idea of a joke, she wonders, though she can’t conceive of a punchline as she stands waiting for the percolator to boil, hands flat against the wooden countertop while gazing out the window at the farmlands rolling away from the house like waves. The stove is still burning with the charcoal that baked today’s bread, predictable as ever, and she finds herself imagining what it would be like to be the only person here - Daud's natural state. What mindset a person would need to find this great, overwhelming solitude so comfortable – or possibly even necessary.

It raises the question of what he’d do if he were in an environment full of anonymous, transient strangers. Or, more accurately, if he’d ever go back to civilisation. She picks up a tin cup with a dent that she made – the first time she impressed him, she thinks – and eyes glossing across the knives is hit by a sudden flashback of the first square fight she challenged him to, how he threw them out the window as he held her bent over this counter, wrongly thinking he’d won.

The percolator begins chittering, so she takes it from the stove and gives it a moment to stop gurgling before she pours, reaching for the sugar pot she’d hurled at his face to delay her fate a while longer. Twisting off the lid, she notes there isn’t much left inside, and is unsure if some was spilled during its brief stint as a weapon as she adds a precious spoonful to the first drink she’s made – at least deliberately – for someone else in an uncomfortably long time.

Clasping a second cup in the same hand she holds the pot, both of which she tucks neatly behind her back, she strolls back onto the terrace to find Daud resting on one of the benches with one leg crossed over the other, pushing back against the table like he’s stretching his spine out. She knows first-hand that much of his labour makes for aching shoulders, clothed today in a shirt that’s really much too big. A wry consideration of whether he has a single thing that actually fits slides a snapshot into her mind of what he’d been wearing during their fight; the stylish tailoring that’d made her want to smash glasses rather than dare to enjoy being around him.

“Your coffee,” she says sparsely, setting it within his reach and stepping away like she’s sliding along on the same rails she came in on; even she knew servants didn’t turn their backs when they moved away, and while it isn’t as if she believes for a moment that he’s remotely convinced, she’s at least going to demonstrate some competence to this play-acting. Yet it would be too much to expect that he’d be satisfied.

“Two cups?” he remarks, voice echoing around the metal rim before he takes a sip and indifferently lowers it back to the table.

“… For your guest,” she replies contritely, the charade only lasting as long as it’s not between her
and a cup of coffee. She promptly drops onto the bench and pours out the rest for herself, reasoning that this venture was merely to test the waters.

“That’s all you’re going to give it?” he nit-picks like an obnoxious professor.

“For now,” she replies coolly, lifting her cup and blowing on the surface – for all the good it does in this stiflingly hot air. “Aren’t you going to tell me what I’m doing wrong?” At least she can suck on something equally bitter as she endures his tenuously constructive criticism.

“Do you need to be told?” he queries gruffly.

“Wouldn’t want to deny you the pleasure,” she retorts before taking a first tentative sip, which stings the end of her tongue.

“Your posture is all wrong,” he delivers as precisely as pulling a trigger, conforming to every expectation she has of him. “You’re not looking down enough.”

“How do I see what’s happening if I’m looking down?” she challenges. Peripheral vision was one thing, but it couldn’t be used for minute examinations like the one she gives him now.

“You keep your head down, not your eyes,” he replies firmly. “Look as much as you need to, but don’t stand like you’ve got an invisible crown up there.” He makes a vague gesture around his brow, and her eyes catch on the streak of silver that runs back from each of his temples, cleaner than the salt-and-pepper mix of the rest. Her father seems to rue the sparse greys he has, though looking at Daud she can’t quite understand why.

“I don’t… I can’t exactly hunch over,” she evades.

“Someone in service likely grew up in it,” he begins studiously, casting off on a tangent that makes her suspect she's in for a lesson. “If they’ve parents, chance is good they’re in it too. They'll be raised since birth not to look someone above their station in the eye, staying permanently bowed lest they seem like they think they’re above their place.”

“You’re exaggerating,” she snaps, getting rather sick of his tirade about the plight of the underclasses.

“I’m telling you how to disappear,” he returns just as forcefully. “If you’ve any chance at getting the hang of this you should be listening to me, not arguing.”

“Because it’s part of the ‘programme’?” she sneers, already irritable before he took it upon himself to start being antagonistic back at her.

“If you’re not going to commit then don’t bother,” he growls, and after a pause only long enough wet his lips resentfully cuts in, “There are some who’d have paid dearly to get the treatment you do.”

“Your inability to stop mollycoddling me is no fault of mine,” she bites, only considering after she’s fired that the shot might've been live, because he doesn't say anything for long enough that she suspects she’s hit her mark for once. She’s not so blind to have not noticed the line he carefully treads around hurting her.

However, it’s not the pain that frightens her, but the bloodcurdling glimpses she gets when the veil of restraint is temporarily dropped. Except that’s who he is, and if she’s to work with the assassin who murdered her mother, the least he can do is be himself about it. She needs to learn how to survive that man, not this watered down pretence of someone who’s at peace.
“… You need to unlearn everything you’ve been taught about how to move,” he begins quietly. “Back straight, head up, shoulders level, all of that is wrong,” he emphasises as if he’s going to dismantle her and build something else back up in its place. “The only sharp edge should be your knife, the only eyes you look into the ones in your target,” he rolls effortlessly into what must be a set speech, perfectly preserved in some dark corner of his mind. “Even they shouldn’t have looked at you more than twice, because you’re the most forgettable thing in the room – right until you strike… Now Lurk-” The fact that he stops like a train ploughing into its buffers is the only reason she knows something is off.

“Lurk what?” she prompts. “In the shadows, I suppose?”

“Hm,” he murmurs uncomfortably, and something has totally derailed him, but what it could be escapes her.

“Is the coffee all right?” she asks misleadingly, and he pauses mid-sip, holding her in the corner of his eye as he cautiously lowers it from his mouth.

“Fine,” he says stiffly. “You remembered the sugar.”

“Then what’s got you looking like I forgot?” she turns back on him, and he gives her a distinctly prickly look.

“Nothing,” he says flatly. “Focus on the programme.”

“I don’t understand how this is supposed to help me,” she retaliates, possibly more annoyed by the fact that he won’t answer her than anything else. “You’re supposed to be training me as an assassin, not an actor.”

“I’m not training you as anything,” he snaps like a hunting dog. “This is to show you what the people out to kill you are capable of.”

“I thought that’s what you were for?” she baits, and it feels like it’s been days since he made any real attempt to ‘assassinate’ her. “Instead of talking at me, why don’t you actually do something?”

Another man might have been provoked into acting at that very moment, plunging head-first into predictability and making a fool of himself, but she knows Daud well enough to be sure he’s no fool, so his world-weary stare and inaction at her provocation is no surprise.

“Mark those words,” he says like carving a seal, and stands up as he finishes his coffee, banging the empty cup onto the table on a way that tells of aggression kept carefully underhand. His parting words to her before he sets back off into the trees are, “Your challenge still stands.”

The heat is slowly making madmen of them all; even Daud appears unable to stand being out in it for extended periods, and although every hair on Emily’s neck stands up each time he comes and goes from the shade of the terrace, he makes no moves on his vague threats of earlier. Then again, neither does she act on his wretched challenge, and in the meantime the table accumulates a modest pile of potatoes and other vegetables for their dinner.

“Should I start doing something with those?” she offers a throwaway line when he’s nearby on one such occasion, gesturing with a tip of her head to the dirt-caked pile. He looks at her like he’s inspecting for a trap, but her trick might as well be a lack of hidden intention – she needs something else to focus on aside from the miserable heat, his damned challenge and vaguely
ominous promises.

“Yes,” he answers sparely, seeming short on words as he wipes a sheen of sweat from his face. “Wash, skin, chop.”

“Would you like me to cook too?” she offers in a way that’s carefully drained of sarcasm, stopping herself from picking up her head to give him a steely look. Keeps it bowed, even though this isn’t a real attempt to fool him, simply testing what he wants her to put into practice.

“Not yet,” he says firmly, and passing behind her on his way inside taps his first two fingers on each of her shoulders in a way that makes her jump – no such assassination attempts, but he does it as naturally as if she’s no guard at all. “Shoulders down.” She bites down on her vitriol and catches his eye, breaking her deliberately humble posture to fire back against his critical gaze.

“Yes Daud,” she says through gritted teeth, and he turns away from her like he’s hiding something.

She fetches a fresh bucket of water, splashing some over her face for good measure, then brings it back to the merciful shade of the terrace to begin washing the vegetables, setting them in a line along the grainy wood after scrubbing away soil and digging out the eyes with the tip of a dagger.

Daud demonstrates his ability to recede into the background when he unassumingly sets down a cup beside her as he comes back out from the kitchen. She’s already reached for the citrus-tanged water and taken a drink when she realises what he’s done; she was aware of him, of course, but the innocuous way he moves around her offers some insight into what he’s really asking for. He didn’t ask if she wanted something to drink, just did it out of the expectation that she would, and if she were at home she’d have almost certainly paid it no heed.

He heads back out and she continues slicing the skin away from potatoes and carrots, leaving them in a dish that she takes into the kitchen when she’s done. Following his example, she doesn’t seek permission to take the steps she knows well enough by now to do for herself and simply kindles a fire in the open hearth, hanging the pot where the remnants of yesterday’s stew sits to make stock for today’s. She’s also picked up enough to know she shouldn’t be asking obvious questions, so steps into the doorway and announces, “The kitchen is ready for you,” when he’s next back under the shade of the trellis, keeping her damn head and shoulders as low as they will go without looking unnatural, and the way he eyes her feels like a scalpel.

“Better,” he delivers with surgical precision, but upon getting up adds, “Drag your feet, only people taught posture walk like that.”

She scowls, feeling like nothing she does will ever be quite good enough for him, and mumbling to herself about the wretched nature of footwork as he walks inside.

Emily is standing just past the patio, clinging to the edge of the shade and wondering if she wants to brave the walk to the water pump when out of nowhere Daud’s elbow presses into the junction of her neck and shoves her firmly sideways.

She’s no idea where he came from – he never stepped through the kitchen door, she’s sure of that much – but it’s past the point now he’s holding her firmly to one side and pulling her arms behind her back with relentlessly quick movements. He winds rope around her wrists after crossing them behind her back, twisting it into knots that she feels her pulse thumping against, and when she opens her mouth to assault him the one way she has left his hand clasps firmly over it.
“No screams, your highness,” he murmurs right behind her, and though it’s his voice, he’s changed it somehow – stripped out any scrap of kindness; how the Knife spoke.

She struggles against a tide of chilling remembrance, being bundled into a cab screaming her bloody lungs out, staring at his back down an alleyway and wishing she had a sword to do to him what he’d just done to her mother. Before she can bite a chunk out of his hand it lifts – but only to pass a cloth in front of her face, fastening it across her eyes, and then with uncaring jostling he marches her out under the scorching sun.

She knows what this is – what he’s doing – and that she might as well have asked for it the way she railed at him earlier, but rather than calling out the role-play for what it is, telling him that this is not funny and he needs to stop right now and take this damn blindfold off and untie her, she staggers over ground that she wishes she knew as well as he did, led blindly away from the house like a lamb to slaughter.

Her mental map of the grounds isn’t good enough to give her any idea where they might be heading; guided only by a hand firm on the back of her wrists. While she could struggle and scream blue murder, she’s been trained for this, and compliance – or the appearance of it – is a preservation tactic she knows better than to test him on.

They finally come to a halt, the sound of a door opening failing to tell her anything helpful, and she stumbles as he shoves her wordlessly inside some unknown outbuilding and pulls it shut behind her. Noises from the other side suggest he’s fixing it in that state, and just like that, he leaves her to the darkness and sound of his retreating footsteps.

Chapter End Notes

This one goes out to anyone who thought these two might stop being terrible to one another any time soon... naaah.
The Twenty-Fifth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily Kaldwin is no stranger to being caged, but she doesn’t get mad – she gets loose.

Chapter Notes

Happy Chinese New Year to any of those who celebrate, and welcome to the next leg of the trash ship cruise aboard the HMS Emily/Daud, currently on a May-December tour around the isles of old man sweats and unresolved-everything, daily fights and wet t-shirt contests to be held on the deck as per the brochure.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bound, blindfolded and confined, the first thing Emily does is curse herself bitterly for allowing this to happen to her - *again*. She let her guard down with foolish assumptions, relying on her radar for Daud like he can’t slip under it whenever he wants, and allowed herself to be bundled into… wherever this was. Fortunately this is only a testing ground for her survival skills, so she gets to learn from her mistakes rather than paying for them with her life. Something she keeps in mind, because if Daud can do it to her here, someone else could do it somewhere else; when it wouldn’t be a game and she might not be so lucky.

Her first calling point is to find her way to the nearest wall, slide to the ground and start working the ties behind her, pulling on the knots to steal slack in the binding, slowly widening the loops around her crossed wrists. She doesn’t know how long she spends writhing against a rough wall, sightless, simply getting enough leeway to turn her hands so they face downwards, but it’s enough to drive her to her wits’ end and back again.

Next comes the hard part, where she struggles back onto her feet and folds over, inching her wrists further and further down her back until she can shove them past her hips with an ugly grunt. She slumps back to the floor with her arms tucked under her knees, which then end up bent well past her ears as she coils up enough to squeeze each ankle through the loop of her arms, shoving the knots even tighter as she pushes her feet against them to get all the space she can while pulling her ungainly skeleton through itself. She yanks herself free with another brutish noise, sitting up almost normally as she tears the blindfold from her face with a broad sigh, finally revealing where Daud has abandoned her.

It’s one of the buildings she must have poked her head into during her early exploration of the grounds, paying it almost no heed due to the apparent insignificance of the contents. She’s on a stamped earth floor within arms’ reach of a workbench – barren of tools unfortunately, or she’d have something to facilitate her escape – and at one end of the room stands a smithing forge. The charred brickwork gives no indication as to whether the structure was laid by Daud or predates him, but the dust and cobwebs suggest it’s not been used in some time – perhaps at all by the current occupant.
Getting to her feet, she examines the door and confirms that it’s fixed shut from the outside; there’s no windows to speak of, though some light filters through gaps in the badly maintained roof above her. Her hands are still tied, something she might be able to address if the pressure she put on the knots to get her hands in front of her hadn’t made them all but unworkable. There’s nothing within her informal cell that she can use to cut herself free, nor has she the inclination to spend hours here trying to work her hands through the loops. Her first and foremost priority is getting out, and she’ll worry about using her hands independently of one another later.

Turning back to the forge, she leans into it and peers up the back, looking through a straight chimney to blue skies. It’s a little on the narrow side, but is the only useful opening she’s found, so without further concern climbs through old ashes and starts to worm her way up the chute. She manages to use her bound wrists to her advantage somewhat, pushing her elbows out to jam herself in place and pulling on the anchor it makes as she shifts her knees up and caterpillar-shuffles her way over charred brickwork caked in what might be centuries’ worth of soot. The possibilities of backing out become increasingly smaller once she's fully inside the chimney, but it’s a straight shot through the roof so she keeps going with the mildly frightening conviction that up is now the only way out.

After a few worrying moments of getting stuck and a truly impressive catalogue of cursing, she finally shoves her head out into the fresh air and sneezes several times in a row, sliding the rest of her body out onto the roof and quickly rolling off the side of the building to wind herself landing in a shrub – with the noises the rafters were making under her weight, she’d be back to square one if she waited any longer. Astonishingly she doesn’t appear to have aroused Daud’s suspicion, and sitting up once she can breathe properly finds it hard to even recognise where she is in the dying light. Nonetheless, she gets to her feet and starts walking uphill and soon enough the house looms over her.

‘You walk like an Empress,’ his voice echoes in her ears as she strides up, so she consciously softens her steps, making herself more timid and begetting the reluctant realisation of how it quietens her approach without the need to creep along at a snail's pace. She doesn’t know which way the game goes from here, but upon getting all the way to the terrace without sight of him, is tired enough to find the hammock the most appealing option of any and climbs in like she’s a sailor coming off rough seas, heaving a quiet sigh as she settles and lets her eyes drift shut.

That she hears Daud's footsteps and they suddenly stop is a great indicator he’s about to strike, but when she inches open an eye and sees him just past the doorway to the kitchen staring at her like a ghost, she comes to the conclusion that he wasn’t expecting her back, much less to be in his hammock coated in a thick layer of soot.

“You made it out,” is his initial comment, holding a lit taper in one hand that burns down pointlessly to his fingers as his gaze zeroes in on her and eyes narrow. “Were you crawling around in the forge?”

“You fit?” he asks with what appears to all intents and purposes to be genuine surprise.

“No, I rolled around in this filth before opening the door,” she retorts scathingly, but he disarms her rapier wit with a belt of laughter.

“Not bad,” he delivers in what sounds suspiciously like a compliment; a contradiction of the praise he’d refused to give her once upon a time, so she somehow feels compelled to add a catch.

“Well there’s one thing I haven’t attended to yet.” She raises her hands, coated almost black and
still bound at the wrists, and that really tickles him.

“Now, how did you manage all that?” he rumbles in a delightfully gratifying way, but doesn’t wait for her reply before heading back into the kitchen to return a moment later with a knife. He strolls over while she’s still holding up her hands, and with a thumb and forefinger touch examines the mess she made of his work.

“The knots were looser before,” he observes as he slides the cold blade between her skin and starts sawing away at the rope. It’s only after he starts that she realises how little it bothered her, hardly registering him running a knife between her wrists as a threat.

“I saw to that,” she remarks aloofly. “You know how I feel about your leniency.” His hand jolts as the knife suddenly pulls free, separating her wrists at last. She turns over her hands and pulls the rest of the rope away, a muddied pale band like shackles where the soot couldn’t reach. “How long were you going to leave me there?”

“Until dinner.” His continuing disbelief suggests that he was expecting to collect an irritable and much-defeated her from the confines in which he left her, not confront this filthy winner.

“How long did I have to spare?” she asks, trying not to gloat too obviously.

“Long enough to wash up,” he bolts, and she can’t really fault the suggestion. She gets out of the hammock without falling flat on her face, and realising she probably looks more like a chimney sweep than an Empress, so uses it to her favour and keeps her posture small, resisting the temptation to hold her head up eye and eye him something fierce.

“Yes Daud,” she says meekly, giving a subservient bob of her head and ensuring her feet barely leave the ground as she shuffles away.

“You don’t need to keep chirping that at me,” he calls to her back, and she stops, straightening up like who she really is before turning back to meet his eye.

“Really? I thought that’s what you wanted?” she states, and though his expression is mostly disguised by the dying light, she could dare to guess at the kind of intense stare he bears at her.

“Not when you don’t mean it,” he mutters into the dusky evening.

Emily douses herself under several buckets of cold water, a relief in the crushing heat that has continued almost unabated even as the sun slips behind the hills. Scrubbing herself as clean as she can, she returns to the terrace still sodden just as Daud finishes lighting the lamps hanging from the beams of the trellis. He slows to watch her approach – how long has he been doing that, she thinks, but can hardly remember a time when he didn’t.

“You’ve been washing in your clothes again,” he murmurs, setting the cover back over one of the lanterns that casts his face in flickering gold, while a warm wind sweeps up the hillside and stirs the shadows like ink through water.

“You’d prefer I did without?” she bites, and it’s like she’s touched him with electricity; the ripple that passes across his face as fast as the beat of a butterfly’s wing. “When’s dinner?” she changes subject, relieving the pressure she senses surely as she’s known anything about this man and murderer she’s been sent to learn from.
“Help yourself,” he says sparsely, so she heads in, leaving a trail of water all over the floor as she fills a bowl with stew and takes it back outside to eat, even the marginal difference in temperature between the indoors and out making enough of a difference to be justified. He follows suit a few minutes later, sinking down at the table not-quite opposite from her – he’s cagey tonight for reasons she can’t quite place. He’s not the one who spent all afternoon tied up in a filthy outbuilding.

“That,” she begins, commanding his gaze to her with a register she more often uses in court than with him, but she’s spent most of the day pretending to be someone she’s not or crawling around in mad dog heat with her hands tied together, so feels entitled to actually be herself for this slice of the evening, “was not an experience I’m keen to repeat.”

“You wanted me to do something,” he replies flatly.

“Yes,” she concedes, “but it wasn’t quite what I had in mind.”

“All the more reason to do it,” he offers contrarily, and she wonders if he can take any respite from making her time here so uncomfortable.

“Well if you feel inclined to try it again,” she trails off upon realising there’s nothing she has to threaten him with – he’d probably claim to welcome death, and has inflicted just about everything else on himself already. “... I’d prefer if you don’t.” She chooses instead to quote his own words back at him; phrases echoing through the days as they contest this ground that’s nowhere near big enough for the both of them.

“You’ve still got a challenge to complete,” he grunts before starting to shovel food in his mouth, no table manners in sight, and she itches to retaliate – too bad she doesn’t have a glass of something to empty in his face.

“To hell with your challenge,” she issues. “It’s not possible.”

“Surprisingly defeatist of you,” he remarks so neutrally it’s annoying, like he’s smothered out the emotion in his voice.

“I can’t get you to look twice when you’re always looking,” she points out, sticking him with the accusation. His perpetual stares haven’t been missed, and the guilt eking out of his lowered gaze tells her he knows it as well as she. “There’s not a thing I could do to convince you I’m anyone except who I am.”

“You’ve barely tried,” he insists, then gives a nod at her hand. “Even now you hold a spoon like it’s made of silver.” He appears to be dedicated to the principle of not making eye contact above his station, and though he hasn’t said it in as many words she’s heard the criticisms of her status all too clearly, like it’s any doing of hers to be born to the mother he murdered.

“First my footwork, now my table manners?” she scathes. “It’s a miracle I survived assassination this long.”

“Behave yourself,” he gives in an unexpectedly authorative snap, looking up at last but with nothing good in his expression. Perhaps that’s how he would’ve spoken to the people he trained, but she’s none of them, and it freezes her would be silver spoon in mid-air.

“I beg your pardon?” she inquires icily, holding him in a lethal glare.

“Instead of making excuses, you should be trying to do what I’ve asked,” he says unforgivingly. “Throwing toys because you’re not a natural at something is childish.”
“I’m *not* being childish!” she retorts, slamming her incriminating cutlery on the table in a way that is unfortunately exemplary of the point he’s making. He doesn’t even bother to reply, just lifts his wonky eyebrows at her and takes a mouthful of food. “So I’m a natural otherwise?” she probes instead, excavating the compliment she almost missed as she gingerly picks the spoon back up, though her appetite is pitiable in this heat and company.

“I didn’t say that,” he replies stiffly. “You haven’t applied yourself yet.”

“Because it’s-” she starts to say, but he cuts her short with a look as precise as the slices of his sword. “Define ‘apply myself’,” she settles petulantly.

“If you don’t commit to a deception then it’s doomed to fail,” he lectures. “Show me that you can choose a cover and stick to it, rather than giving up as soon as you start feeling foolish, and I’ll consider passing you.” She sometimes wishes his instincts weren't so keen, the way he can put his finger on the root of her reluctance like he sees a map instead of a person when he looks at her.

“So this is what we’ve come to?” she proposes crossly. “I leap through hoops until you’re satisfied?”

“That’s the programme,” he replies, far too smug for her liking. “Thought I made that clear.”

“You assured me *the programme* was largely drills, not amateur dramatics,” she points out acerbically.

“This isn’t about acting,” he rasps, “it’s about staying alive.”

“By convincing you I’m a servant?”

“By convincing the assassin who wants to kill you that you *aren’t* Emily Kaldwin,” he unloads, looking square at her with all kinds of accusation in the crows’ feet framing of his eyes.

“Rot,” she dismisses. “My life doesn’t hang in the balance for a few theatrical bits.”

“You’re not getting it,” he returns, increasingly irate. “Mastering deception helps you see it in others.”

“Perhaps, but I don’t see that performing like a monkey will prove anything,” she declares, then pauses like she’s finding his pulse. “Except that you like bending me to your will.” He’s not the only one.

“That’s not it,” he glowers, seeming shreds of restraint away from baring his teeth and snarling as he continues, “and until you show me you can do what I’ve asked, the lessons stop here.” She’s spent so long testing his boundaries that it’s a surprise to find this time he isn’t flexing like she’s come to take for granted. It doesn’t sit well.

“What you’re asking for is ridiculous!” she finds herself snapping. “Playing make-believe for what? Is watching me make a fool of myself really so entertaining?”

“This spectacle is the only way you’re making a fool of yourself,” he says bluntly, a catalogue of tension written in his face to compliment a resentful growl as he adds, “and you gave me your word you’d follow the programme as directed.”

“Before it devolved into *nonsense,*” she replies, knowing she’s probably gone too far without any intention of pulling back.
“Nonsense?” he echoes, folding his arms in front of the bowl he’s managed to empty around arguing with her. “Then we’re done here, aren’t we?”

The finality of the look he gives her almost knocks her back from the table; she knew there would be a point where she couldn’t push him anymore, but for it to be now — over this — is a shock. She wants to say he can’t do it now, that he should’ve warned her, it’s not fair, and a hundred other petty excuses she’s sure would only lower his opinion of her.

Instead she stands up, leaving her half-eaten meal on the table. “Fine,” she floats on breath as cold as a corpse; followed every inch of the way by his stone-cold gaze as she walks to the kitchen door and disappears inside.

Chapter End Notes

Gawd Emily, talk about a dramatic exit (literally agonised over this ending bc original draft sounded too much like she was actually leaving and I didn't want to confuse y'all for a whole week).

Realest of the real talks, Daud snapping 'behave yourself' is a story-wide personal highlight for me. I read this chapter back some time after first writing it and was just like DAYUMM, because forgetting what I've written is a thing that I do (and then get to read it back and bask in a puddle of my own trash). You know, just in case anyone was under the impression that I have any chill at all about these two or this ship. Nope. None. Nada.

Oh also don't you just love where instead of making a situation better it just gets even *worse*? I know I do, because I have to torture 1) myself, and 2) all of you. Sorry I guess?
The Twenty-Sixth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily lets her hair down.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry.
Really.
(It's probably not what you think)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Her bedroom door won’t slam into the frame the way she wants it to, the last in a series of injustices that has taken Emily to her room on a half-empty stomach with a mind to pack up her things and storm away from this damn house and Daud without looking back. Except it’s dark, she’s not prepared for the trek back to Karnaca, and worst of all: he’d think he was right. If she runs she’s no better than him, fleeing from what she can’t handle, and it’s not who she was raised or wants to be.

Her room is dark but the lantern at the top of the stairs has been lit, so she goes with creeping footsteps and a candle to fetch a flame, then fiddles with the lamp in her room until she can get the old wick to burn, unused until now because she’s only been coming here to sleep. By hazy light, she reaches behind her head to unfasten her hair with overtense hands, winding it past her shoulders and reaching with an annoyed sigh for a whalebone comb. Turning her aggression towards the tangles in her hair, she brushes it out ruthlessly, taking no quarter with its misbehaviours or inclination to curl after being coiled and pinned while wet. It gives her something to focus on that isn’t rushing back downstairs and throwing something – heavy – at Daud.

He’s made up his mind already, she reasons bitterly, knowing in her gut that doing anything she’s expected to will only reinforce the conclusions he’s drawn about her; that she’s childish, and incapable or unwilling to do what the assassins he’s trained before her have. Even if he’s not training her as an assassin, technically, she forcefully reminds herself of those that he has; relives the feeling of a knife in her back, and the thought that the next one could be the last thing she ever feels.

She’s seen enough to realise anyone Daud’s trained – not just in the mechanics of killing, but his precise, detached ethics of slaughter – would consider her life just another job. They could slip into the tower, steal some staff livery and become a ghost in the hallways to haunt her until the work was done. She probably wouldn’t even look twice at them as they filled her cup of coffee in the morning.

So while she could rush back downstairs and start a simple fists-and-anything-else fight, this time is different. Deep down she’s already accepted there’s only one course of action that will truly
challenge his neatly bound parcel of expectations, which is doing exactly what she said she couldn’t – or wouldn’t, whichever it is.

Emily accepts what she has to do like a dose of plague cure; the only thing that will wipe the smirk of his face is meeting his wretched challenge. However, he takes issue with the way she does everything, so she knows his unforgiving eyes and preconceived notions of what she is will split apart anything she tries to do in the vein of things before. All of his suggestions are traps, because he has in his mind already what they should be, and she’s not it. So to really fool him, she has to do something he won’t see coming.

Turning a fresh page on the challenge, she thinks of the servants he makes her feel guilty for being so unfamiliar with, but more broadly of anyone ‘low born’ as he likes to say. There’s one time in her life that stands out from others, when she left the protective structure of her status and lived – albeit in secrecy – among people that she’d never normally associate with. Although she was young, she’d spent a good while in the Golden Cat, and at times had considered with her fractured naivety and childish logic what she would do if Corvo never came for her – what if she had to stay and be like the women there; real people who, not unlike those of certain other ‘trades’, performed a frowned-upon service to make a living. A few of them had spent time with her when they wanted to be away from their customers, whom she was able to observe in other capacities as she crept waywardly around the building for nigh-on half a year plotting her escapes.

The breeze has picked up into a strong wind that wheezes past her window, and a thought sends shivers up her back as she mindlessly combs her hair, which seems intent on pulling into waves that usually associated with the endless rains of Dunwall. As she contemplates exactly how insane it would be to come at Daud with an impersonation of those women who used to leave their love letters in her room after carelessly tearing through the piles out of boredom, the lesson he illustrated with a potato chimes into her mind like clockwork – doing whatever it takes to get to the mark.

She puts down the comb with a blunt clack, hand lingering against the bone before she abandons it to wash up in the scarce water she has left upstairs – she ought to go down to refill it, but isn’t showing face for something as shamefully insignificant as that. This would be a cover that’d let her get close enough to do ‘the job’ as he puts it, and though the prospect is terrifying it makes an unnerving amount sense.

This doesn’t stop a swarm of butterflies thrashing in her stomach when she imagines the way she’d actually have to behave to be convincing. Although she knows without a doubt that his reaction is unlikely to be anything good, she’s equally as sure that it would make him look twice, just as he asked.

Playing with fire, she turns her attention by lamplight towards the unruly pile of clothing that constitutes her wardrobe – plus what she’s left out on the roof. She has to start somewhere, so shrugs out of what she’s wearing like being carried away on a tide, wondering down to her bones if she can go through with it – ‘show me you can choose a cover and stick to it’ he’d demanded, so if she’s going to play she has to bluff until she goes bust.

The things she left outside include a small slip that she’s taken to sleeping in, largely on account of how visible certain parts of her anatomy are through the flimsy fabric, but she takes it as a first choice and slides into it like she might still go to bed if she loses her bottle – not that she’ll get any sleep in the state he’s left her in.

It’s a sacrifice in temperature, but the neatly tailored trousers that she arrived in have barely been worn, and she pulls them on entertaining a recollection of compliments issued by certain persons of
interest in Morley regarding the flattering appearance of her posterior in such trappings. After weeks of traipsing around in torn shirts and altered clothing that render her closer to a streetrat than her true status, she hopes anything unmutilated might constitute enough of a difference to throw him off.

Similarly unused is a waistcoat that fits tightly enough to almost constitute a corset, though even it doesn’t rise high enough to disguise the finer points of her figure under the veil-like layer underneath. But if she’s going to commit to this; show him that she understands the task and prove she can do it, then she can’t have reservations. Whether or not he likes how she meets the challenge is irrelevant, or she tells herself as she carefully conceals her dagger along the straight lines the corset-like binding makes of her waist.

She looks down at herself and a shock runs through her at the thought of being seen by anyone in such a state – but especially by Daud. It sparks questions about what makes those nerves so sore, why should it feel so gut-wrenchingly dangerous to appear like this to him?

All the more reason to do it, she reasons vindictively, thinking of what her transformation will do to those long stares of his. Remembering the girls of the Golden Cat as she crosses her room, she runs her fingers through her hair a few times and then fishes one hand after the other into her shirt to pull up her breasts.

Opening the door, she stands still for a moment, letting sudden breeze it’s conjured wash over her, then like making a pact with the supernatural dedicates herself to the sole pursuit of one objective: proving him wrong.

She arrives to the kitchen barefoot, quiet padding of feet and a few creaks on the staircase the only sounds she makes as she creeps through the house in the quiet of the evening. The air is hot and wet, like it might rain even, something the barometer of her hair seems to reinforce with the way it pulls practically into curls, a strand of which she winds around a finger as she hangs by the door. She sweats from the weather and everything else, because after confirming that he’s still in the kitchen – last stop before retreating to his room – it means she really has to go through with this.

He’s positioned with his back to her, cleaning the things they’ve used that day, though her half-empty bowl sits on the table behind him, laid out like she might change her mind and come back for it. She swallows her heart and whatever it is that makes her feel like she’s throwing herself into white waters, and leans against the doorframe so she won’t be seen to tremble should her nerves betray her.

“Fancy a drink?” she drawls in a way that she’d been schooled ruthlessly by Callista to stop doing before she returned to Dunwall Tower. Though she doesn’t put it past him to know she’s there even before she speaks, he stops dead all the same. He doesn’t even turn all the way around, pausing as soon as he gets far enough to check her at door. Maybe he’s not expecting her to come at him with the put-on twangs of a working girl, much less the makeshift attire of one. More than anything, he appears focused.

Except his examining stares are nothing new to her by now, so she does what she wouldn’t usually and smiles into it – perfectly saccharine, as prepared for courtly bores. She tilts her head to one side and meet his intense, accusatory glare with hair spilling over her shoulder, hanging across her face until she tucks it back behind an ear. A perpetual state of annoyance with her hair when it’s down is a primary reason that she wears it up at almost all of the time, but now it works to her advantage – so few have seen it unbound, and certainly not Daud, who blinks heavily in a way that might’ve
been missed by less keen eyes. A second look if she’s ever registered one, but she’s playing this one until he backs out, just like he wanted.

“No,” he says in an unforgiving growl that ought to tell her she’s better off back in her room packing her bags, but instead she slinks across the room, moving in front of the bowl she abandoned in a fit of anger, like she can replace that memory with the sight of her perched on the kitchen table eyeing him up like a prize to be won.

“Well that’s no fun,” she slurs, attempt at an accent fading into a more humble adjustment of her tone. The girls at the Cat were from all stations, ‘here and there’ as he’d once said of his Whalers, and it was the way they spoke more than the specificities of their background that made them what they were: like they wanted be there, regardless of whether they did. Even as a child, she’d quickly learned the difference between someone who was working from one who was off-duty, nor was she a stranger in her adult life to a not-so-dissimilar pretence. “Why don’t you let me pour you one, then see how you feel when it’s in your hand?”

Daud opens his mouth and closes it again. When he does speak, it’s to utter a single word. “Brandy.”

Her smile broadens, and she flexes her toes before setting them back on the ground, sliding up and keeping him fixed in the corner of her eye as she sways over to the shelf where he keeps the bottle. The last time this came off the wall was when she stabbed him, she recalls as the neck sits familiarly in her hand, pausing for a moment as she reaches for a glass with the other and takes a deep breath that she exhales for twice as long as she inhales. She’d been trying to kill him short weeks ago, told him that she hated him and meant it with every fibre of her being, and now she’s up to her neck in these lunatic machinations and can’t see any way to go but further in.

Holding her heart and hands steady, she turns around and walks the bottle, glass and herself all back to the table. She sets them down and pulls the cork out of the bottle, leaning forward to pour so he can’t see her face behind the unevenly curled curtain that falls between them. Her own hair can’t count as a mask, she tells herself as she half-fills the tumbler and puts the bottle down, gripping the edge of the table – in part to cover any shaking, because her nerves are still alight like she’s been sipping bottled thunder.

She picks up the drink and strolls over to him, circling round to his front because he’s still barely moved a half-turn from where he was when she entered the room. Though she’s yet to catch him unarguably in the act of looking anywhere except her face, he must have noticed the changes to her appearance afforded by her attire. Retired, scarred, and broken a man he may be, she still proved with her own knife that he’s flesh and blood like anyone else. He watches her with that face she’d thought unreadable – though she may yet find out what it really means.

“What do you think?” she puts to him as she presses the second drink she’s made for someone in recent memory into his pliant hand, wearing a grin whose mischief isn’t entirely imitation. He looks dead at her as he raises the cup to his lips, then puts his head back and tips the contents straight down his throat.

“What are you doing?” he demands as he rights himself with the empty glass, and she could take it any number of ways, but keeps the game afoot lest he decide she’s backing out first. Not a chance.

“What I have to,” she answers vaguely, tilting her head to one side as she pushes fingers into the back of her hair, therapeutic on roots that usually take the tension of tight fastening for such a volume of hair. “Besides,” she continues upon righting herself, then with pulse racing reaches out to pick up the last fastening on his shirt, running the rough seam under her fingertips as she glances up at him with her head bowed, mostly to cover her nerves as she delivers a line like setting a
match to fuse. “You look like you could use a good time.”

He stares back like nothing could be further from his mind.

Chapter End Notes

Yes... that's really where this one ends. Seriously, sorry about that, dramatic tension and alla that stuff...

Can't say how long I worked around the ideas for this particular bit, including several cycles of being utterly convinced it was completely unbelievable and what on earth am I thinking, but then this is first and foremost a TRASH SHIP and if I can't sail downstream in a garbage can then I'm not doing it right. And when I first thought of it I was like OH SHI- and that's usually a good sign so I try to trust my gut.

RIP Daud and all hail Emily 'I'm just trying to PROVE HIM WRONG AND NOTHING ELSE' Kaldwin, Empress of having her head firmly buried in sand.
The Twenty-Seventh Lesson

Chapter Summary

Tonight, he's her mark.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Another drink?”

“No.”

“Something else, then?”

This is their greatest standoff to date, and the careful way Daud lowers his hand to set down the glass he’s drained of brandy, tapping a finger against it like the beating of a metronome, constitutes his boldest manoeuvre so far.

“What do you have in mind?” he puts the ball back in her court with a cryptic twist in his expression.

“Oh, you can use your imagination, can’t you?” she remarks, only to find he won’t act back to her invitations, so takes a step closer, turning the fingertips that worry at the fabric of his shirt into a firm grip. “Now’s not the time for cold feet,” she tells him, unable to do this dance without a partner, and if he’s going to throw ultimatums at her for not taking this challenge seriously then he can’t very well back out when she’s finally hit her stride.

That intense focus has swallowed him up, no trace of anything in the least bit forgiving as he regards her like a vial of poison.

“What’s your name?” he plays into the bit like he has to drive it past his own clenched teeth. While he’s nothing if not stubborn, in the rapidly escalating game of which piece of belligerence wins he’s shown his cards. He’d rather bite than let her win by default.

“Anything you want it to be.”

“And if want to know your name?” he rounds back on her, jagged edges slowly rounding off like they’ve been sanded by harsh desert winds. She looks at him and wonders why she’s never contemplated whether his face is attractive in all her studies of it thus far. He could do with a shave, glimmering silver in the stubble across his jaw, but the features are striking nonetheless.

“Call me Em.” An abbreviation dusted off from the archives; no one calls an Empress by a mere syllable of her name, so naturally it’s perfect.

“All right,” he settles, trying it on for size like a pair of gloves, “Em.” It sounds too natural on his lips, and she hopes dearly he doesn’t pick up the habit. That is if she stays any longer than this night; debatable, when he tilts his head slightly off-kilter and posits, “So, what’s a girl like you doing here?” like this is really what they’ve come to.
“It’s a living,” she answers weakly, conversations within conversations like water spiralling down a storm drain. This is what he wanted her to do, she tells herself, to commit, though he’s clearly determined to put her to the test.

“Hm,” he murmurs as rich as honey molasses, before uttering, “Well I’m not buying,” in case there’s any doubt about just what guise she’s adopting, or what his stance on it is. Except it’s not surprising at all, and she’s watched women dress down men who thought they were above paying for the services they craved, many equally as stiff as him – unwilling tag-alongs who could be built up and broken just like anyone else.

“I’m sure we can work something out,” she replies easily. This act suits her in a way the bent-backed subservience he’s tried to demand from her didn’t; the art is convincing the customer they’re not in it for a job – that they’re simply enjoying themselves – and it’s undeniable that she is getting something out of toying with him like a cat corners a mouse. “Sure you don’t want another drink?”

“Best not,” he murmurs in a tone that needs dredging to haul it out of the gutter, and she’d give anything to know what’s going on in his head right now. He’s still not moved from the statuesque position she froze him in at the door, but when she pulls on the hand balled in his shirt he allows her to move him. Opening to the room, his arm remains a lone bridge to the counter, fingers still sitting around the glass she put in his hand.

As if she’s unlocked him, or perhaps just presented with a rare opportunity, when he finally moves his hand it’s to weave fingertips through her hair; a simple, curious gesture that does something uncontrollable to her. She’s not usually touched like this, so unreachable by merit of who she is, but not being Emily Kaldwin is exactly what she’s here to prove, so she lets him wind her around his fingers and looks like she’s enjoying it – maybe she is.

There’s a moment of recognition, like the stone in his eyes melts for just long enough for her to look at him and connect, but it’s only in passing, because she can’t go through with this without swallowing sincerity and blinding herself to what consequence her actions might have. This is about making a point, and he surely knows that too.

“There’s something inescapable about the tiny movement thereafter that sends waves crashing through her; his eyes flick down and back up again, a fact neither of them can ignore nor deny. She’s sure there’s plenty going on under the surface, but he doesn’t let more than that lone ripple show.

Then he reminds her who she’s dealing with, when his mouth twists into a deceitful smirk and the hand leaves fairy-light winding of her hair through his fingers to grab an unquestionable handful of her rear end; a raffish gesture that as quickly as it scandalises assures her he’s trying to rattle her – for all the good it’ll do him.

“A thing or two,” he slurs like glass could melt between them. Though his hand retreats quickly enough to save himself some broken fingers, there’s a squeeze in the grip that tells her plenty about the humanity he’s got left.

“... Yours,” she replies tensely, holding an even keel in spite of the incoherent shock of him
grabbing at her like a cut of meat. Though she faces certain challenges in her personal affairs – an overprotective father first among them – she’s by no means inexperienced, and isn’t backing out first just because he dares to lay hands on her. Simply runs her own palm from the flat of his collar to curve around his neck, digging her fingers like a hook into the rope of muscle running from his shoulder, as if she’s going to hoist him off the ground to drain whatever life he’s got left, and sordidly adds, “For a price.”

He won’t be moved, so she pulls herself to him with one hand while the other releases his shirt and drifts lower, fingers poised to reach for the end of the dagger pressing into her ribs and stretching onto the balls of her feet as she puts her lips against his. Except it’s not quite enough to only carry out the motions this time, because her commitment is so terribly important, so after a moment of technical contact she lifts for long enough to take a breath that seems desperately important to snatch, and then actually kisses him.

He’s motionless throughout, stubble scratching her mouth as she holds his lower lip between hers, and although this is all part of an elaborate cover – to convince him she’s someone she’s not – there’s an uncomfortable implication in the means she chose. She didn’t even consider anything else once the idea took root, because it feeds into something greater she’s trying to find out about him – the question he wouldn’t answer when she was limp and dosed in his arms, thinking in her addled mind that he’d dare to do to her what she’s doing to him now.

She doesn’t reach for the knife yet, caught in the moment and knowing that if she diverts into a simple act of violence she’ll never get a true response from him about why he can’t stand being touched by her like this. Yet he doesn’t break, so she pulls away and trains her focus on the jaw she’s taken under siege, raising an empty hand to rub the back of her fingers over the bristles of his cheek – not done yet.

“Not sure I like the beard,” she murmurs pensively, then compels herself to look up at him. She’s read the Outsider has black eyes, but wonders if there could be anything darker than Daud’s in this moment. “Why don’t you shave and…” she hesitates, then as if to crack the delicate mask he wears over his real face gives it a teasing slap, “we’ll try it again.”

Contravening his usual rules about how he handles her, she’s shocked when he shoves her back with enough force she staggers several steps, reaching for the table and stopping dead when she sees that there’s no lack of clarity about the meaning of his expression when he looks at her now: he’s furious.

“What are you doing?” he growls in a way that sends her instincts scattering; this is a case where she should most definitely run, her gut screams at her in alarm.

“What you asked me to do,” she hurls back. “Why did you push me?”

“Push you?” he echoes with a flash of teeth behind the snarl. “That’s rich.”

“You said yourself that unless I make you look twice then the lessons end,” she steams, taking as read the implication that she can’t let it happen – not until she beats him.

“And you thought this would work?” he spits like she’s filled up his mouth with poison.

“You wanted me to commit,” she reminds him, gaze hardening against the oncoming storm. “You backed out first, so I win.”

He darkens. “This isn’t a game.”
“No, it’s your infamous *programme,*” she ridicules. “You can’t set the rules of a challenge and then take issue with the way I find to meet them.”

“You’re meant to be getting close to the mark, not… throwing yourself at them,” he bites, and to make it sound so crude is somehow more infuriating than the fact that he shoved her like she pulled a blade on him – before she even did.

“If that’s the way you’re going to be, fine,” she decrees, quickly assessing her points of entry. “I didn’t want it to come to this.”

She bursts into a lunge, reaching for her weapon with one hand and twisting the arm he raises to block her with the other, seizing his joints in a lock that pulls him into a point of exposure, baring the side of his face to her like prey to the hunt.

He reacts slowly – distracted, perhaps – enough to let her get the dagger from underneath her waistcoat all the way to his cheek, the blade scraping over his skin for all of a second before he grabs her forearm and flings her off him like a load from the fields, staggering backwards and driving the point of her weapon into the wood of the countertop to slow her stumble.

“There,” she seethes as she regains her balance, carving a groove in the counter that she vindictively adds to as she pulls herself upright and lurches forward again, reclaiming lost ground. “Close enough, if I’m any judge of the matter.”

“You aren’t,” he snaps, rubbing his jaw where she’s sheared him. She wasn’t trying to kill him, had deliberately gone for his face instead of his neck as if trying to put a new scar on him, but he looks more assaulted than if she’d tried to cut his throat.

“Now who’s being childish?” she poses with a spiteful grin.

“You can’t *do* this, Emily,” he runs like slurry out of sewer grates, and she registers belatedly that the heat isn’t passing; that if anything he’s getting further into the quiet, not-shouting fury that’s more terrifying than any temper.

“Do what?” she retorts, finding her voice less steady than before.

“… Play with a man,” he murmurs, blanched knuckles pressing a fist into his brow like he’s going to cave his face in.

“You weren’t going to fall for anything else,” she says resentfully, because she *knows* that it worked and yet he won’t admit it. “Why, what’s the matter?” she puts to him dangerously, pushing her fingers over the pulse she’s been taking since she walked in.

“What are you trying to prove?” he glowers, brimming with white-hot anger.

“Oh, we’re back to that old favourite?” she responds curtly, but this time at least has an answer for him. “I’m trying to find out what your problem with me is.”

“It’s not– it’s… what you’re trying to do,” he answers brokenly. “You keep *testing* me.”

“I’m trying to find out who you really are,” she retorts before she even knows it’s what she thinks, though it’s true all the same. “After everything you’ve done, don’t you owe me that much?”

“After everything I’ve done, *this* is how you want to know me?” he responds raggedly, and she’s forced to consider that from his perspective this approach may have come across somewhat… differently.
“No… I mean,” she flusters. “This is what you wanted.”

“That’s not what I wanted,” he echoes with a diminutive nod that makes her question every decision she’s made to bring them here. Except it worked, and there’s nothing more infuriating than not being acknowledged – like she’s still a child who can’t possibly know what’s required or right with anything.

“You asked me to convince you, even for a moment, that I’m someone I’m not,” she argues.

“Exactly,” he rips like he’s tearing apart unspoken agreements, then looks away, bringing his hand to grip the point of his brow as he mutters, “It’s not real.”

“Isn’t that the point?” she remarks caustically, and there’s a guilty pleasure in the way it seems to crush him, but without thinking about it she adds, “Though you could do with a shave.”

She pinwheels for a moment off the end of what she’s said, and his hand slowly comes away from his face to resume looking at her. Admitting she meant any of it suggests there might be other truths mixed in with her deception, and while it’s been pushed to a new level by this… ploy, she knows the tension between them isn’t purely a reaction to what she’s done tonight. Having finally had enough of the uncertainty, levels a tempestuous look at him and cuts on the artery.

“Just what are you holding back, Daud?” she demands, which is what it comes down to; snarling over his boundaries when she flirts with intimacy – why she needs that territory is harder to explain, but the mere fact that he doesn’t want her to have it is enough of a reason to go after him.

“You don’t want to know,” he murmurs.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” she asserts, and his look is somehow one of despair.

“Go to bed,” he says tiredly, and it’s shocking that he should resort to such triteness, even if it is later than either of them would usually be up.

“You go to bed,” she retorts, but he starts moving like her permission was the only thing he needed. “Wait,” she calls out mere steps later, and he pauses with a bolt of smugness that borders on sycophantic.

“That,” he begins, and though some the storm seems to have blown out of him, there’s rough seas enough to discourage her from further provocation, “was not an experience I’m keen to repeat.”

She boggles for a moment as he quotes her own words back to her, but realises that of course he has them catalogued, because he pays attention to everything she does. He starts walking for the door again, but pauses just before passing through it, laying a hand against the frame she’d clung to for dear life at the start of this madness.

“You pass the challenge,” he issues like it bleeds the life out of him to admit, and then just before storming out, growls something that sounds unnervingly like, “Put some damn clothes on.”

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Chapter End Notes
Even as the creator of this godawful mess, I do feel this is one *tasty* chapter. At least I did until editing kicked my ass a whoooooole lot. I have no idea why a chapter I like so much could give me SO MUCH grief but I guess these things work in mysterious, infuriating ways. Anyway hope I didn't screw it up too much *falls down*

Some of Emily's terrible behaviour is a direct lift of Lauren Bacall bits from To Have and Have Not (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQ-sjUURajU). I threw the famous 'Bacall' look (which was also a result of nerves) in this one too.

Anyway, hope y'all enjoyed this one and watch out for next week, cuz there's gonna be a surprise...
The Twenty-Eighth Lesson (end vol 1)

Chapter Summary

Daud thought he was long past anything like this, but she’s going to put a clot in his brain any day now and there’s very little he can do about it.

Chapter Notes

Soooo.... surprise?!!!?

I had this wild idea to try out Daud's PoV for a change and it turned into this whole... *thing* so enjoy this literal double-dose update (I'm not kidding, it's 6k). I'd say I hope I got him right but at this point I'm too far into the trash ship to really be worrying about anything except consistency within my own character rules so *shrugs and paddles trashcan downstream*.

Sorry to everyone I had to cryptically laugh at or conspicuously avoid mentioning the fact that this was coming.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daud’s door slams into its frame and he leans back against it, fingers closed tightly over the bridge of his nose as he methodically adds to the long list of reasons he’s a foolish old man. A record he continues to keep, even if it does nothing to erase the image of her branded in his mind or quell the simmering in his gut. Rather than go through everything he shouldn’t have said or done back there it’d be quicker to run it the other way around – leaving might have been the only thing that he ought to have, and sooner at that.

He curses himself for not knowing better than to push any child of Corvo Attano, or to expect her to do anything except shove right back. He’d been thinking – until tonight – that she was respecting the boundaries he’d laid down out of necessity. More the fool him.

Walking in the dark across his room, he slumps into a chair with a wretched sigh and fumbles blindly until he succeeds in sparking a piece of kindling, raising the flame to a lamp on his desk that washes everything in sickly amber glow. Catching his reflection in a small mirror set against the wall – only time he ever has to look at himself – he winces, cheek smarting where she gave him a shave that would’ve drawn blood were it any closer.

He tests fingertips against the mark left by her knife and hisses through his teeth at the sting, but worse is the flood of memories it unleashes. Needless to say he’d been surprised when she started toying with him amorously, for desperate lack of a better word, but at least they'd been the antics of a headstrong youth. A game he could keep at arm’s length, burying the unacceptable urges it drew out of him like new growth after fire stripped a land and left it barren for decades.

He’s contrived scores of reasons about her possible motivations to do or say any of the things she has, but none of them are good, and his attempts to discourage her have only had the opposite
effect. Mostly she’s being contrary, he thinks, except this time was different; she had been different.

No man should have to kill an Empress, but trying to resist one is proving to be a different kind of agonising. Especially when being around her brings out things he’d tried to be rid of along with all other vestiges of who he once was. Alternating between being convinced she has no or every idea of what she’s doing, the only unchanged thought is that nothing he could make her feel is anything like what she does to him.

Pressing his face into a hand as the wind whips through the shutters of his quarters, still relentlessly hot, he wonders when either storm is going to break.

With uncontested self-loathing Daud dips his fingers into a pot of oil and smooths it over his jaw, eyeing the razor he agonised over taking out before finally collapsing to the rationale that with a stripe already sheared off him like a sheep he may as well finish the rest. Even the way he lies to himself is despicable, because raising the blade to his face he knows he’s not doing it for any other reason than her. She could tell him to fall on his own sword and he might actually do it, if only to get away from this vicious downward spiral before it kills him some other way.

She’s going to break him once and for all, destroy the husk he tore out of a rotting city and managed to take somewhere the noise and filth couldn’t reach, pretending as long as the silence lasts that’s it’s not inside him and will come wherever he goes. Worst of all, she might not even know she’s doing it.

He could tell her exactly why it’s unwise to play with a man plagued by an inability to resist vices that should’ve been long gone and are proving to be anything but, but if she’s yet to grasp it herself – she would’ve left the moment she realised – he’d rather it doesn’t come to that. He might still get out of this with the rubble of some dignity left, and if he can give her something truly useful, make good on the promise Corvo put to him in that single line of text, then it’s not all for nothing.

He’d been managing this infatuation – to lay words that ought never to be used on it – to the point of believing it wasn’t going to be an issue. That he could get up with dawn each day and spend hours of hard labour driving it out of his mind, preparing for her inevitable arrival to fill it back up. Believing as long as distance was maintained they’d never need to come to harsh words; he could keep the swansong feelings under lock and key, act like it was nothing and focus on the work he knew and understood. As long as she kept her distance, something more mental than physical. Close was tolerable, contact just bearable, but not acting like she could actually want – much less enjoy – it. Nothing he deserves after what he’s done.

Yet even after what he’s done he can’t endure the torment of falsehoods. It’s been so long since anyone captured his interest, taken it hostage at knife-point in her case, but in spite of the ways he’s changed one aspect remains the same – still woefully unprepared. Her propensity for surprising him is remarkable, but for all he should’ve seen it coming this evening’s display shocked him more than he’s any fondness to admit. Blew his damn head off his shoulders just about. After such ardent protests about being unable to deliver a convincing charade she was barely recognisable in the state she came to him, and there were plenty of moments when he could’ve easily mistaken who’d invaded his home and life with no respect for either.

As he slowly scrapes the stubble from his chin, he rues the moments of indulgence that started this slide into the mire. Times when their complicated pasts and context slipped away and he’d foolishly let himself appreciate what a remarkable woman she’s become, as if there were no
consequences to visiting that long-untended shrine in his chest. He’d dared to enjoy moments of good company, things that he’d been sure he’d never have want or need for again; debating such cleverness and wit, her intent to hear him out before drawing conclusions, how she can make him laugh even when he’s set against it. Wary respect and admiration soon turned into something far more troubling, forced on him like unwilling metamorphosis.

Yet the greatest injustice she’s done him is giving him what he asked for, because it was only when she stopped taunting him with intimacy that he’d really started to lose himself in the marvel that she is. An irreversible blow to his ability to stop falling for the last person he should ever consider that way.

If he were younger… he’s started a thousand times at least, but knows it wouldn’t change enough. Too many things would have to be different for that train of thought to end anywhere that makes sense, and then it wouldn’t be her and what she does to him that’s in question. On some level she has to know why — what — he’s holding back, but this bloodborne need to drag it out of him beggars belief. If she knows, then surely she wouldn’t keep at it like a dog on a pig’s ear.

Tilting his head to the side, he shaves carefully around his scar and fights the memory of her hand against his cheek; curious fingers that have grabbed for his face like it — and everything else — is hers to lay claim to. To say nothing of the slap that made it imperative to get her a safe distance away from him as quickly as possible, lest he do anything else to regret into his grave.

He finishes shaving and lays down the razor, reaching instinctively for a cigarette box that contains slim, carefully rationed cigars — closest he can get — and sets one between his lips with mechanical familiarity, lighting it off a dribbling candle stub. He’s possessed by the lingering ghost of her mouth against his as he inhales and blows out a cloud that’s quickly swept away on the wind. It’s one thing to stand there while she puts her lips on him out of spite or show; a meaningless annoyance, but somehow — barely — manageable. However, that’s not what she did this time, and there’s not a sensible reason in the world he can think of why she would do what she had.

Though it was ultimately what she said that’d snapped his control like degraded rubber — the causal suggestion of there being an again, even as part of an act, is too much to endure. Because this can’t keep happening, he settles as he pulls smoke into his mouth and spits it billowing into the night air. Perhaps now she’ll see what she’s been messing with and rightly retreat before any real harm is done. The chains he’s spent decades forging will drag him down sooner or later, but he can’t sink her to the depths for a drowning man’s last gasp.

He moves from his desk to armchair, flicking ash with a thumb and calculating the likelihood of her staying after this. If she leaves he’ll stand a chance at straightening himself out; cauterise the wound, claw back to the fragile stability he’d built before she arrived to smash it into pieces. Hopes mostly for his own sake that she doesn’t tell her father too much, as Corvo’s mercy seems likely to be rescinded if he learns the man he sent his daughter to grabbed a handful of her ass under the guise of an assassin training programme he’s not meant to be teaching her. On reflection he’s no idea what lapse of judgement made him think it was in any way reasonable to confirm if she feels exactly as good as she looks, barring that he could get away with it. But even Corvo’s revenge wouldn’t be as bad as carrying on, if for some reason she doesn’t leave, not least because he’s getting worse at stopping himself.

There hadn’t been a problem at first. He’d not expected to be found by anyone from the life he left behind, much less her, and it was unpleasant and unwanted but he couldn’t refuse payment on so great a debt as his, so even though no sum is enough to clear the red in his name he’d agreed to pay down on the interest at least. Then after the first few confrontations with the daughter of the Empress he murdered he’d resigned himself to a slow dogfight until death — his, most likely — and
she almost pulled it off. He’d been relieved, still believing in some irrational part of his mind he can only die in conflict. That someone has to violently put him out of his misery to make it stick.

Except then she had to treat him like a man and not a murderer; how instead of being proud of what she’d done, Empress Emily Kaldwin, First of her Name, had fallen over herself to stitch him back together in spite of it being the last thing he deserved. Against all expectations and a promising start, she didn’t seem to want him dead, she wanted to know why and how and who he was – is.

Being around her ignites instincts that’ve been cold so long they surprise even him, kindled when he woke thinking he was about to die and almost made sure she did instead. He would’ve slit her throat by the lakeside had she not whispered his name like turning a key in a lock, but even then she wasn’t angry – he almost fucking murdered her, just like her mother – and she chose to interrogate him about matters of life and death, and how or if she should be more like him.

An assuredly a bad idea any way it’s looked at: don’t be like the man who’d taken the sight of her coming out of the water, noticing wet clothing stuck to skin like he’d never seen her before then, and remembered with a guttural shift what it felt like having her underneath him. Until that point she hadn’t been anything except a messy band of unwanted memories and invasions to the peace he depended on to keep a right mind, but after fleeing from him as any reasonable person would, and unlike anyone who knew better, he realised that she kept coming back.

Maybe this time she’s finally learned her lesson.

For a while he’d framed it an unexpected but straightforward case of lust, in spite of all the sense it didn’t make. Nought but a dirty secret to be kept out of sight, even as she started making sport of the boundaries she sensed in him when she started getting too close, because for all her other talents she’s truly incapable of refraining from playing with a fire he’d been sure couldn’t be relit, blowing on embers as if she’s trying to light a forge.

When even that couldn’t be helped, he’d foolishly thought he was safe to admire from afar. Like she wouldn’t notice him holding back and make it some godsent mission to dredge it out of him, as if it’s a thing she or anyone else needs to see and shouldn’t be let alone.

He tries to remember the last time someone really wanted to know him, instances that can be counted on one hand, and even less where the desire was returned. Unfortunately being undeserved has no effect on the intensity of wanting it, and he dozes off with a burned stub clenched between his fingers.

Waking with a start, Daud’s first realisation is that the weather has finally broken, the beating of heavy rain roaring against the quiet, and the second is that it wasn’t the rain that woke him.

He sits up and drops the cigar end, turning his head to better catch the noises that’ve roused him from uneasy slumber; she’s on the goddam roof again, it sounds like, and he leans over one arm of his chair, eyes barely open as he separates her from the elements – not an easy task when she’s a force of nature herself.

Continuing to subvert any rational behaviour, the sound of her clambering about on the tiles over his room poses the question of what in the world she thinks she’s doing, then his heart relocates to his mouth when it’s followed by an ungainly scuffling down the wall. Only she could take torrential rains as a cue to start climbing around on the outside of the building, and against his better instincts he draws on the eyes of the void, throbbing colours telling him when she’s made it
to the ground in one piece and fading as she walks away from the house.

What he should do, he reasons, is leave her to whatever mad devices she’s possessed by and go to bed. What he does is the exact opposite, curiosity overpowering rationale as he leaves his room and prowls through the empty house in pursuit of her. Never could abide a mystery.

She doused most the lanterns after he left, he notices, barring one at the top of the stairs and another on the kitchen wall. She needs the light, unlike him, and while the last thing he ever wanted was her consideration she’s fit herself into his world like it was unfinished without her.

He steps out under the rain and is drenched in moments, leaning on the void to lead him to her like a moth to flame. She’s standing perfectly still a little way from the house – pitch black and pissing it down, yet she stands on the scrubby land with her arms held out, face to the lightless sky. He can’t conceive of what she’s doing, or even remember why he followed her; a conspiracy of his gut and mind making the ashen pile of his heart pound like there’s something left of it to beat.

“Emily,” he says from a safe distance - nothing else to call her - and her outline shivers, whipping around to look for him like there’s anything to see.

“Daud?” Every time she says his name shaves another layer off his certainty that he’s past any of this, and her simple bemusement rather than anger is a signal that he should stay exactly where he is if he’s any idea what’s good for either of them.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“I could ask you the same,” she replies, contrary as ever.

“You climbed down my roof in the middle of a storm,” he points out, evasive under the cover of darkness.

“It’s the rain,” she answers magnificently, turning her face upwards again. “How I’ve missed it.”

He doesn’t understand how she can make him miss things he’s never had, an ache from decades-long neglect of feelings that he doesn’t want to lay claim to, and words fail him as he gets wilfully lost in the rain. It’ll bring a whole tide of work and activity with it tomorrow, but tonight he needs to do no more than appreciate the respite from a long, oppressive heat. He puts his head back and lets the water roll over him, washing away the signs of struggle. Such tension is exhausting.

“I think I finally understand why you like it here,” she remarks unprompted, still giving herself up to the torrential weather with her arms outstretched as if he’s expected to put an altar underneath her. He’d be tempted if he didn’t know better. “It’s comforting, isn’t it?”

“What is?” he asks, voice raised to make it over the rain. The power of this place is supposed to be its disconnection from the rest of the world, sheltered from a harsh a reality that she’d brought right back to his doorstep, forcing him to confront dormant things he’d wistfully taken for dead. He’d told her Corvo killed the assassin that night, but it isn’t strictly true. The person he’d been is still there, buried alive, and hasn’t stopped being real or he wouldn’t want her like that man wanted things.

When it finally comes her answer is clear. “All the emptiness.”

What’s he supposed to do when she can reach into him and pull out truths no one else has even had a chance to know?

“Yes,” he answers as she slowly breaks him apart. Gives over to the darkness, standing in the
downpour knowing exactly where she is without the need for eyes. It’s easier not seeing.

“See?” she remarks puzzlingly. “Was that so hard?”

She doesn’t know the meaning of the word, he thinks as he fights an urge to look at her through the void. Looking hasn’t helped him any, even as the only thing he’s allowed himself – or tried to, when she’s not wearing impossibly tight clothing and offering herself up to him for the sake of his damned programme.

He shouldn’t have started her on it, never anticipating that she’d take to it like a prodigy or the remembrance it would unearth from ground he’d taken for barren. He almost started talking about Lurk for gods’ sake, the way she dragged him back into the heart and mind of someone from another life. And not since Lurk has he known anyone so sharp, taking lessons that ought to stretch for weeks and mastering them in days. Corvo’s taught her well, almost too well, he reflects as the slice she put in him tingles like blood magic. She brings back things he isn’t supposed to remember, like how he could actually enjoy teaching the skills that’d ruined his and so many other lives – especially hers.

“Was what?” he foolishly asks, because if he’d the restraint of a better man they wouldn’t even be here and if he couldn’t resist before then he certainly can’t now.

“Being honest with me,” she replies like he hasn’t been carving himself off for her one piece at a time, and he senses her move. Trying to face him, she turns blindly and her hand meets his arm, fingers curving around it and lingering like she’s reason to touch him without anything except antagonism, so he musters his willpower to carefully pull it away.

“Why can’t you just be yourself?” she asks, sounding so wounded it practically seems reasonable – but if he lets go then it’s all condemned to destruction by his hands that tear down everything they touch. She has to know, he thinks as he winces under the cover of darkness, but if she does, why is she still here?

“You don’t want that,” he says surely, standing with arms crossed to lock them from roaming elsewhere, water pooling in the channels it creates as they stand in the middle of this goddam storm arguing about another.

“Why don’t you concern yourself less with what you think I want, and allow me make my own judgement?” she comes back hard and fast; almost too much to handle, as always. Even as a screaming brat he shoved into other hands, whose cries rang out his ears as he washed away her mother’s blood and wondered how in fuck he’d let it all come to this.

“You’ve no idea what you’re asking for,” he mutters, but she steps forward seeming even more vexed.

“Don’t give me that,” she drives into him – taking blades out of her hand has been a mediocre attempt to make her any less dangerous. “I know you who you want me to think you are, Daud, but it can’t be real or the man who comes out when we’re fighting wouldn’t be there.” She’s one to talk of things that aren’t real. “I know you’re holding back,” she entreats more honestly than he’s got resolve to handle, “so why are you still bothering?”

“Don’t do this,” he states, warning and plea wrapped into one.

“Why not?” she shoots like the opening of a duel. “What are you going to do?” Hanging the question like she wants him to.
“Nothing,” he tells himself as much as her.

“She sounds surprised, which she shouldn’t, because she only needs to want something for him to be willing to give it, and her words echo in his ears unhampered by the drone of the rain — why don’t you shave and we’ll try it again. Her hand moves, fingertips rooting for his scar like she’s a ritualistic need to touch it — him — and he reaches up to take her wrist, lifts it away.

“You started it.” He sounds pathetic, but he was broken the minute he stepped out in this storm to go after her. Not letting go is an oversight that lapses into intention, but she doesn’t fight him, choosing incomprehensibly to let her wrist sit within his grasp like it’s not something she should reject as a matter of course.

“Yes,” she says over the noise that almost swallows them up. “I’ve been wondering when you’re going to finish it.”

Letting the boulder roll downhill, a noise escapes from the back of his throat that the rain probably conceals, but the weather can’t cover the way he raises his other arm to wind cautiously around her shoulders, folding her into a hold that’s as true to what he wants as he’s ever allowed. He’s waiting for her to put the pieces together and bolt, but leans in only to find she’s doing the same thing, now so close that even the rain doesn’t fall between them.

Unlocking the hand wrapped neatly around her wrist, like a bird from a cage her fingers fly to his face, holding onto him like she’s concerned he’ll back away. The actions of a better man, not him: who shows her what she seems so desperate for as he tilts his head and kisses her.

“Which way is the house?” she asks with a false sense of security, though they’re still wrapped up like lovers and not talking about it doesn’t mean it’s not happening.
“You don’t know?” he replies far too ordinarily; this ability to revert to some semblance of normality after every new lapse of his self-control is a dangerous mechanism, letting the coals grow hotter without ever quenching the flames - looking at where it’s got them.

“I’m disorientated,” she excuses, and a smirk rudely commandeers his mouth. By what he couldn’t dare to ask, for fear of what the answer might provoke in him.

“This way,” he says gruffly. In the shuffle of extracting themselves her hand slides down his arm, but rather than retain grip on the sodden fabric her fingers coast over it’s his hand that she grasps, holding it firmly in hers as he starts back the way he came.

The rain is somewhat dissipated by the trellis, though still patters irregularly over them as he leads her inside. Letting go to pull the door shut, the noise quietens somewhat and he looks over to catch the Empress of even this lowly homestead half-lit by lamplight looking like the farthest thing from it.

The glow cuts her out in near-perfect profile as she pushes her hair back from her face, wringing the length of it out to dribble rainwater into a puddle that shines on the floor. She’s a sight to knock him straight through the back wall. Rather than putting clothes on she’s taken them off, clad in the same undershirt from earlier over 'shorts' that scream of her handiwork. There must be men who could stand stoic around anyone as incredible as her while she slowly cuts her own clothing to pieces, but he’s not one.

He’s done calculations of the lifetime between them more times than he’s dignity to admit, but the specifics are of little concern save that she’s entirely too young for a ruin; especially a delusional, hand-holding fool with a history to despise. But damn it all if she doesn’t look like the best and worst thing he’s ever laid eyes on, and unable to maintain mute in sight of a view so magnificent it boils his brain like a kettle – he whistles.

She glances over at him with a perturbed look, and after laying hands and now far more troubling things on her if it’s a low whistle that finally throws her into her right mind it’d make for some twisted justice... as much as any exists. No just world should let a man kiss and be kissed by the daughter of a woman he murdered, so that it’s just happened is the greatest proof of the heartless chaos he knows too well.

“Like what you see?” she poses coyly instead of the outrage he’s still waiting for, turning so her curves wax and wane like the cycles of a moon. Yet she’s playing him and he has to wonder what she’s getting out of it. Perhaps his suffering is enough.

“Thought I told you to put some clothes on,” he remarks with a pang of annoyance. He’s not a fiddle to be picked out of boredom or curiosity.

“Yes, it was very rude,” she replies carelessly, and he lays a hand over his eyes as a mute laugh of despair escapes him, dragging his palm down his face as he marvels that such a creature could be grown in a so hostile an environment as Dunwall; that she, after everything she’s gone through, can be capable of such brevity. She strings him up with a look that’s far from pure, peeling clothes off slick skin like it's any help at all and continuing, “and I thought I told you to stop holding back.”

He frowns, not sure where she’s going with this, but to hell if he can concentrate on it when he can barely stop himself staring at her nipples under a wet mockery of fabric. Visible through her clothing even when it was dry, now the fabric is near-translucent, clinging without subtlety to a body that should not and could not be for him to appreciate.

“Instead of gazing at me like a dog after a bone, why don’t you just do whatever it is you’re
thinking of and see what happens?” she puts to him dangerously, daring to invite such a thing when
she’s the one who can’t possibly want this, and on top of that – who’ll leave. Although she’s never
deigned to discuss how long she’ll stay, it can’t be that much longer with all of a kingdom waiting
for her, and he’s already anticipating the hole she’ll leave behind.

Though, he reasons sinfully, if he’s to live the rest of his miserable life with this indecency he
might as well take her by the elbow and guide her back against the door. Drinking her in like
quenching his thirst on saltwater, he waits for as long as he can stand before lifting his other hand
to her cheek and leaning in to kiss her again, because he’s a weak man indeed.

She turns her head up and angles into him, any reasons why she’s letting him do this left
unattended as his lips part just enough to pick up the wetness of hers, and then a throb running
south deraills it all. It’s been too long since he felt any of this and longer still since it meant
anything, so he pulls back with a shudder only to be devastated by the moment he catches her in;
eyes closed, lips parted and like she’s not expecting him to stop. The problem with touching her
like this is that it’s too much and not enough all at the same time, so pressing a hand over his brow
and shielding her from him, he confronts reality.

“This is unwise.” She fires a knowing look when he peers out between his fingers, satisfaction in
her sharp features as she turns his words back on him yet again.

“So?” she delivers like the powerful Empress she is. A woman who can’t conceive of not getting
what she wants. Exactly what she wants from him – or why she wants it – he can’t fathom.

“So,” he echoes with weak breath. He can’t drag her down into the filth he’s come from, has tried
to leave behind, so it’s better not to stoke the fire at all. “We should go to bed.”

“We?” she turns back at him, eyebrows arcing across her forehead.

“Separately,” he blurs moments later, and there’s a shift in her expression that he could be deluded
enough to read for disappointment. “Your room should be cooler now.” The comment seems to
appall her, which makes no sense when he’s only thinking of her comfort, and she reaches to wind
the jet black streak of her hair round her neck, wringing water from it that trickles over her
collarbone and draws his gaze down yet again.

She keeps telling him not to hold back, but if he follows the pit of heat in his gut he’d be on his
knees with her nipple in his mouth about now – and even consumed with desire he hardly knows
what to do with he knows there’s no way she could truly want that, so he stays and tries uselessly
to tear his eyes off her.

“You’re doing it again.” Her voice lifts him out of the daze, gazing back up to her as he swallows
the knot of lust in his throat.

“Sorry,” it slips out as her expression turns to exasperation, and she draws and blows out a sigh,
picking up cold where her breath washes over him. When she lifts herself off the door he steps
back, preserving the space between them more important than ever, and starts turning before she
can do anything else. He needs to get a door between them, not against, so paces across the kitchen
letting the heat slowly wind down. He’s no idea what time it is, but dawn is surely around the
corner, and there’s much to be done tomorrow.

The rains bring change; a more than applicable sentiment to consider as he carries himself on
weary legs towards his room. She’s right on his heels, at least until the dim glow from the staircase
passes across him and he hears her stop.
Just a few steps from here he’d made his first big mistake, backing her up against the wall and thinking that she was too resentful or naïve to respond to his intimation in any way but stopping. As if a glimpse of the attraction he’d barely acknowledged would be enough to scare her off, because it was and remains a truly terrible thing.

He’d touched her like it was nothing, turned up her face to his and really looked, wondering how long it’d take her to kill him and or leave. Should’ve driven her out when he still had a chance. More the goddam fool him, who hadn’t realised she was a far greater person than he’d given credit at the time and had no notion that he was wading into the cloying trap of being more in awe of her with every breath he takes in her presence. Even when she's driving him to madness – perhaps especially then.

“Daud,” she speaks his name without knowing what it does to him – or she does and that’s exactly why she uses it – and he turns to look at her in question, nothing left to use on words or resistance.

She’s climbed the first step, but leans around the wall and reaches for his sodden collar like she owns him; she probably does, because he lets her pull him up to her and plant a kiss on his mouth with such ease that it corrodes any assurance he had there's nothing in this for her bar toying with a despicable man.

“Goodnight,” she says too kindly to bear, letting him go like a paper boat and disappearing to leave him spiralling helplessly in her wake.

The void ripples like raindrops on water. A voice is cold and brine and grit, snatching him from the moment between awake and asleep with the force of ripping out a harpoon.

Well, well, Daud. Just when I thought you wouldn’t interest me again.

Chapter End Notes

HAH. I mean. Yeah. Did I mention this update is 6k? It's a big boy.

Welcome to the window into my bottomless thirst for Emily Kaldwin. Did I mention I'm crazy gay for her? I expect that might be obvious now...

Just for clarity's sake the balance of the narrative isn't going to change, Emily's PoV remains the default and this chapter was just for the hell of it. I'd been thinking about what's going on in Daud's head (a lot) and thought it would be a fun/challenging thing to flip the narrative for this particular scene - for the obvious (I hope) reasons. That's why it's so long as not even *I'm* that cruel and I wanted to contain the 'Daud' neatly within a chapter... ish.

On the subject of Daud (my fav), ofc everything is open to interpretation including *my* interpretations, but for the record my headcanon of his orientation is a rusty (crusty) demisexual. This was obviously influenced by the cheeky 'never interested in sex' line in the penny novel in DH2, where my reasoning is that he didn't write it but
someone who knew him (relatively well?) may well have, so it's plausible that he could have appeared defacto ace without actually being fully aromantic/asexual (though still on that spectrum). Sexuality is a broad scope so reconciling my original (boring) setup for his orientation with the DH2 easter egg was a really great process that got me to develop something I feel is a better fit for him. As for Emily... that's for another chapter ;3

Next week is also going to be... different. Wouldn't call it a surprise given that big ol' hook I hung on the end, but I'll say one thing - it's not a lesson. Sorry/not sorry (but at least they FINALLY kissed, right?!?!? Only took 75k ¬_¬).
A Talk with The Outsider

Chapter Notes

This is a short chapter in the grand scheme, half the length of the usual updates if that, but given the blockbuster last week and particular content of this one is what it is. Normal chapters from next week onwards.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The void is permeated by a wet cold, the kind that soaks right down to the bone. Salt and whale oil tinge the air, fragments of Daud’s quarters strewn across the twisted plane like his world has simply been ripped up and left at that. Perhaps it has. A voice without a source weaves through the cavernous space.

It’s been a long time.

He’d promised himself to die before hearing it again, so speaks resentfully. “Not long enough.”

A book flies across the corner of his vision like a shooting star, but he doesn’t move so much as a muscle. Movement is the first sign of weakness.

Is that any way to greet an old friend?

Scorn tears at his face. “What do you want?”

He ripples into view like sands pouring into an hourglass. Unchanged, same black eyes.

“It’s so rare that one you creatures manages to surprise me,” he begins, hanging in front of him like all that’s missing is a noose for his wretched neck. “But I have to admit, Daud, you’ve really made this one your own.”

“What. do. you. want?”

“She’s fascinating, no?” he answers in an eerie lilt.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he mutters like putting bone through a meat grinder.

“Yes, you do,” he counters, leaning forward incrementally. “In fact you’ve been consumed by little else of recent.” Always was a fucking eavesdropper, pressed on the outdoors looking in. “Tell me, how far are you going to let it go?” He pauses, waiting for a response that won’t be granted because his prey has had its fill of games. “There’s a rhyme children sing,” he breaks into something between petulant and indifference, like he’d be dismayed if he had a single genuine sentiment in his cold slimy body. “Something about sitting in a tree… k i s s-”

“Stop it,” he snaps, though the cold bastard never felt anything in the first place so there’s hardly a point. Just wants to see if he’ll bark – which he will, always.

“And what comes after that?” Curiosity pools in his features; hunger for things that are denied to
him. “Are you going to bed her?”

“No.”

“You want to.”

“I-” he starts to speak and falters, provoking a predatory tilt from the nasty creature's head. “That’s not the point.” It’s humiliating to admit, but so is he.

“I wonder if Corvo would agree?” The wince at the mention of that name is a momentous lapse, but he struggles to retain control of his expression all the same. Don't feed the beast. “Would he blame himself for trusting you with his daughter? Or would he blame you, and come to deliver the violent death you crave?”

“Let him,” he drives. Corvo gave him this borrowed time so it’s his to take away. Not that it would be without a fight – there are seldom things the Outsider can be right about, but that’s one.

“Of course, if you're embracing a vengeful death you may as well do so knowing what it’s like to have her,” he leers like he’s gotten a taste for Kaldwin hearts, repurposed rationale Daud has used himself in allowing this obsession get the better of him.

Instead he warns, “Stay away from her.”

“That’s what her father’s been saying for years,” he relates, teasing hints at familiarity they two are long past. He actually pities Corvo, knowing all too well what it’s like in the currents of a leviathan’s favour; watching the new sun from over the horizon with the certainty it would set, because this god is a fickle one. “And why should I?” he poses with a sordid taint. “You certainly can’t.”

Daud presses down on memories from a past that he’d rather not revisit – misguided as he was in those long-lost years, always has been – but they rise like oil under pressure. Things he did when he still believed every twisted deceit whispered to him about what he was and deserved, the blind entitlement that came with power. He’s tried to numb himself to the sick things he’s done with that bastard’s eyes right behind his, an avid spectator to what depravity would be shied away from – almost none, as it turned out.

“That’s right, Daud,” he comments, privy to the same images like an indecent picture book to thumb through. Messy ends and sinful holes he’d crawled into with a trail of blood behind him, needing to prove to someone – anyone, especially himself – that his hands could be for something aside from bloodshed. Taking what he believed he was worth and deserved, when really the only thing cut out for him is a violent death, and even that he’s been denied.

“You’ve done unforgivable things – and yet, it seems she’s drawn to a dangerous man. Perhaps it excites her.” He waits, all black eyes and flashing teeth behind the snarl that works its way onto his face whenever they speak – these days, at least. “Or maybe she’s just waiting for you to let your guard down enough to put a knife through your throat.”

“I’d be dead by now if she wanted it,” he retorts coarsely, and surprisingly enough believes it. He wouldn’t have this problem if she’d just wanted to kill him like she was supposed to.

“I rather expected at least *one* of you to be by this point,” he remarks vacantly, looming up high like it ever needed to be suggested who was more powerful; whales didn’t need to trouble themselves with the fish, yet here the monster is pulling him along in the current cast by his slipstream.
“Sorry to disappoint,” he mutters, heaving scorn like bile. No guesses as to which of them the bastard wants to be rid of: the resentful husk of a project gone wrong.

“Far from it.” He leans forward, gazing through endless sockets of eyes that could suck up the world. “You’ve regained my interest.” Pauses like waiting for a drip to fall. “Finally.”

“Is this why you brought me here?” he snarls. “To stir the goddam pot?”

“No, I came to offer you my congratulations, Daud,” he delivers like the knife in the gut that it is. If anything the hollow bastard could experience is anything like what such simple, messy animals as they are feel, it’s very nearly as if he’s enjoying this. “I’ll be watching.”

He thrashes awake with one word on his lips, spearing it into the oppressive silence of his room as dawn stains everything with early light – sun rising on a new day, regardless of the chaos of the night.

“Don’t-”

Chapter End Notes

Hooooowie it was a good kind of tricky working this one out. Not long but I couldn't make it any more than it is.

I subscribe by the DH1/Knife of Dunwall style Outsider more than the new one, so like him smarmy and sassy but without becoming too human and losing that supernatural quality. Harvey whatshisname said something like 'human emotion, inhuman perception' on twitter at one point, though he also said that the Outsider's appearance doesn't change so RIDDLE ME HOW/WHY IT CHANGED (and the VA) between games!

My guiding thematic for the Outsider and Daud's dynamic can be summed up with the phrase "the world's most bitter exes" tho without strictly implying traditional shipping (this is hardly a traditional shipping fic so I ain't about to start :P), so make of that what you will.
The Twenty-Ninth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily contemplates not just how, but why she didn’t see the signs.

Chapter Notes

Unfortunately the off-lesson chapter means that the number of the lessons and chapter numbers no longer match up... think I might have to just live with that one.

Hope this update finds everyone well, I've said it before but writing and updating this fanfic is quite literally the most stable point of continuity and structure in my wacky life at the moment, and while it's definitely for my own satisfaction it sure is nice if other people get some outta it too, so I hope y'all enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘You’re playing a dangerous game,’ the Daud of her dreams slurs with an edge in his voice like a blade beginning to be tempered as he looms over her at the edge of the mausoleum. Pins her to the railing the question ‘what do you think happens at the end of this?’ like she should’ve gotten the hint right there and then; stayed away from his comfort zone instead of drawing up a map of the uncharted territory to explore.

Except she kept pushing even when he asked that she didn’t, warned he’d push back, even outright told her to stop 'testing' him – and still she didn’t stop. Because this man took something so important from her it feels like justice that she should be entitled to lay claim to anything he has left. Even his inclination for her, if that’s to be the case.

She’d blithely puzzled the riddle of ‘not liking it’ as if it was hard to solve, dismissing the smoke signals because the idea that there could be a fire was impermissible. Like he’s not a man in spite of all she’s learned to the contrary. He made it clearer, told her that he couldn’t endure mockery of affection or respect that were make-believe. Because his desires were – are – and it makes her insincerity intolerable.

He’d laid those boundaries out as clearly as anyone should’ve needed to, for all the good it did them, because she’d carried on toying with his restraint until it snapped. Every assertion he made that she didn't want to know what he was keeping behind those walls made her more set on tearing them down, regardless of what’s inside. Just to see what happened, or perhaps because she could.

So she hardly knows, on reflection, why it had to come to him kissing her – no more words of warning, just the rain and a clean shaven jaw and actually kissing her like it could ever be that simple - for her to grasp just what she’s been asking him do all this time.

Because you wanted him to, some traitorous part of her mind has been whispering since it happened. After everything she's done to him it shouldn't be so surprising – all the times she put her lips on him just to get a diversion or reaction, knowing that it got to him in a way she didn’t
want to admit to the truth of, yet she can still hardly believe it. Why she had to make him prove it, even when she knew on some level what was happening, because she was too foolhardy or stubborn or something to let sleeping dogs lie. Except he, ever the man of practice rather than theory, didn’t choose words to do it.

Then there’s the matter of her kissing back, which any way she looks at it she most surely did. At the time it’d been the only thing that made sense; here he was, finally showing her this terrible thing he’d been keeping out of her grasp in spite of all her efforts to reach for it, and all she wanted to know was how deep it ran.

Because for some indescribable reason the only thing worse than being kissed by Daud is watching him trying not to. Seeing that look on his face and knowing what it means while he does nothing is a degree of infuriating that she’s hard pressed to explain. It’s why she’d grabbed him by the collar and pulled him onto her mouth… maybe. To send a sign that things couldn't be the same after this, where he looks at her like that and they pretend it hasn’t happened. Not now it’s finally been dragged out in the open.

She sleeps much later than usual thanks to the respite in temperature, waking with a strong wind rushing up the hillside to rattle the wooden shutters on her window and what might be best described as an emotional hangover.

What was I thinking? She asks as she drags herself out of bed and splashes fresh rainwater water on her face, then attempts to wrestle the wild mass of her hair into some kind of captivity. After being soaked through and slept on wet, it’s turned into a misbehaving beast whose discipline requires control she clearly doesn’t possess today, accepting the unruly strays that tickle her cheeks as she spends entirely too long considering what to wear. Thinks of those burning looks from Daud, and whether she wants to fan or douse the flames.

She errs on the side of modesty for now, with trousers butchered at the knee rather than well above and the only unspoiled shirt she has left, and then creeps down to the kitchen to find it empty. Pangs of relief and disappointment pull in opposing directions in her gut, then a glance at the open door summons recollection of what had occurred on its back last night, sending a heat crawling up her neck that she can’t blame on the weather anymore. Perhaps it’s better he’s not here, she reconsiders.

He’s left coffee out for her, which is by every definition a simple act that she’s thought little of until now, but the inevitable question arises as she drains the bitter cup – how long has this been going on?

Emily stomachs a slice of almost stale bread – no fresh baking today – and sets out to find Daud because, well, what else has she to do? Discovering him tending to the figs, she falls into old habits and starts to creep on up on him – thinking she’s successful until he suddenly whips around and hurls a fruit at her fast enough that the only reaction she has is to raise a hand and attempt to catch it. The warm flesh squelches against her hand, fingers fumbling as it recoils and splodges to the ground.

“I thought we’d moved past you pelting me with fruit,” she comments haughtily, wiping the residual gunk onto her trousers while he gives her a look that doesn’t fall under any sphere of knowledge she’s comfortable with.

“If it were a bolt you’d have a hole through your hand about now,” he remarks like all of the
disciplined tutor he isn’t. No professor of hers would dare put their arm around her and press their mouth to hers, regardless of how much they’d wanted to. Corvo breathing down necks had always been discouragement enough.

“Is that really how you’re going to greet me?” she replies like slamming a hammer onto a nail, and his face shows it. If her words were a bolt, he’d have a hole right between his eyes about now.

“Good morning,” he delivers like she’s got him under duress, continuing with, “Sleep well?” in a tone so formal it makes her think throwing things and being petty might well be the better option. She despairs at how deep into the hills the Daud of last night has run for him to be like this. Even if the first time it’d happened was under the cover of darkness, where things could occur without seeming fully real, the second time he’d kissed her was by light; as precise as one of his drills – sinking a look through her like a whaling hook before hauling in the catch of the day.

Seeing him now brings it all back like a flood; face lined with age and scars like he’s been etched in ink, silver-streaked hair and the new brush of stubble on a recently shaved jaw. There’s a slight mark on one cheek where she’d started it – and she had started it, at least as much as he’d done what she’d asked for and finished it. By being himself at last, unthinkable as it was that the Knife of Dunwall – stolen away in this hiding place away from the rest of the world – could want deep down to do nothing more than kiss her, and more shocking yet that she’d allow it.

Now he dares to stand in front of her flinging figs and wishing her a good morning like either are anything close to what he wants, and when the thought of what he does is enough to make her stomach tie itself in knots, she doubts he’s much different.

“Really, Daud?” she snaps, picking him apart like badly-sewn seams.

He gives her a look that’s all fight and says, “Then what would you prefer?”

*That’s what I should be asking you,* she almost says, throwing straight into a catfight that could land them anywhere. But she’s too proud to claw at him for displays of affection like it matters to her – even if it does, maybe, she doesn’t want him to know that.

“I passed your challenge, didn’t I?” she remarks coolly. “So, what’s next on the programme?”

The combative element in his expression softens as she leans into the practical component of their interaction, making her wonder how someone can flip from… last night, to being as closed as he is now. It was clearly a mistake to think that getting his secrets out in the open would make anything between them easier.

“Now is when you start bringing everything together,” he says like he’s balanced his tone on a scale, “and putting it into practice.” There is something ominous in the statement, carried away on the wind that still whips across the land in the aftermath of the storm.

“I thought you weren’t training me as an assassin,” she says with careful reserve; far from the only thing that he’s supposedly not meant to be doing.

“Training you to understand them,” he replies tersely, the air between them is so thick she could practice sword drills on it. She can’t even understand one assassin who hasn’t worked in over ten years, what hope has she for any others?

“Then tell me how,” she asks as if they’re really talking about generalities, and he pulls his eyes away from her and goes back to the figs. Dozens of the fruit have split open on the branch, ruddy flesh torn open like wounds, which he plucks from the tree and throws into a pile by his feet.
“I told you before an assassin strikes once, when the moment is ripe,” he begins to lecture as he strips spoiled fruit from the branches – moments never to be realised. “The only way you’ll truly understand what that means is by learning to seize it yourself.” He pulls an unspoiled one from the tree and tosses it to her. “That’s your next challenge.”

“So what?” she puts to him as she catches it, then takes a defiant bite out of the slightly soured specimen. “You want me to start attacking you?” He turns over his shoulder to fling her a look with the same force as he’s thrown fruit.

“Start?” he quotes, and even the breeze can’t take the heat out of her cheeks when he says it like that.

“I mean… like you do to me,” she tries to explain, though that only makes it sound worse somehow. He gives an affirmative grunt that might also be uncomfortable, and then for reasons that she’d rather not get into she blurts “What happened to the figs?” like if she isn’t about to turn the same shade of puce as their flesh.

“The rain,” he answers shortly, and it’s some small salvation that he’s not looking at her anymore. “It splits them.”

_Not the only thing the storm broke open_, she thinks before she can stop herself, but knows that much like the fruit there’s no putting these things back together.

Her first attempt to ‘assassinate’ Daud is a regrettable failure; she slips away while he’s still attending to the figs, making like she’s heading back to the house then double back on herself as soon as she’s out of sight and rounds on the nearby ruins, using them as cover as she waits for him. If she knows his habits – which she’s confident she does – he’ll come right past her as he sweeps over the grounds. He rolls downhill throughout the day, following nature.

She forces herself to be quiet even as she itches in her hiding place behind a wall, wishing he’d hurry up for once in his damn life. When she’s about ready to go insane, she finally hears the tell-tale patter of his steps along the path she anticipated correctly. She launches herself at him as soon as he comes into view, hands driving for his face – or neck, or whatever – but he scoops one wrist after the other into the binding of his fingers in a single, clean movement before hoisting them over her head, just high enough that she lifts onto her toes to prevent him actively dangling her like a set of wind chimes.

He clicks his tongue at her and she’s struck with a vindictive desire to sink her teeth into it, scowling as he fixes her with a look that doesn’t do anything good.

“You moved too fast,” he murmurs in that voice like chopped up hunks of dockyard rope, and whereas she might previously done everything within her power to rip herself out of the captivity of his hands – and doesn’t doubt now that he’d let her – today she just swallows and meets his steely gaze.

“You moved too fast,” he murmurs in that voice like chopped up hunks of dockyard rope, and whereas she might previously done everything within her power to rip herself out of the captivity of his hands – and doesn’t doubt now that he’d let her – today she just swallows and meets his steely gaze.

“Thought I wasn’t fast enough?” she replies crisply, not looking away from him lest she miss something like the momentary flight of his eyes up and down her face, lingering for a moment over her jaw like snagging fabric. She’d hazard a guess or two as to what he’s thinking about, but if he’s not making first moves, neither is she. Just because she knows what cards he’s holding doesn’t mean she’s about to call the hand.

“Not in that way,” he replies all business, letting go as if hanging her by the wrists in the iron circle
of his grip does nothing for either of them. “Your problem is coming on too soon.”

Hairs on her neck stand up as she rubs her hands in each other like she’s got to erase the marks of his touch, lest the feelings it ignites spread and burn her up. If she thought knowing just how he wants her would make him any more transparent, that illusion has long since been disproven. He’s still a puzzle that she assembles one piece at a time.

“Wish I could say it’s the first time I’ve been told that,” she remarks daringly, and he gives her a smarting a look whose main success is making her grin; if he thinks what’s happened will make her any less inclined to teasing then he’s very wrong. “What do you mean, then?” she defaults before his stormy expression turns into a downpour.

“Rushing someone as soon as they step into view gives them the advantage,” he explains. “Anyone with half a brain will anticipate an assassin at points of vulnerability, so you play into their hands by confirming it.”

“You would’ve seen me moments later,” she argues, crossing her arms in unashamedly adversarial posturing.

“Then wait moments,” he retorts. “Only strike after I’ve started considering the possibility that you may not be there.”

“How?” she scoffs, blowing irately at a twist of hair that the wind keeps blowing across her nose and tickling.

“People fall into assumptions,” he explains patiently. “If you don’t spring from a corner exactly when expected to your chances are going to be better.” Then, like he’s on a mission to demonstrate exactly what he means by the lesson on expected behaviour, reaches up with absolutely no forewarning to brush back the unruly wisp of hair from her face in a gesture that cuts out her thought processes like an electrical overload. “You have to be patient,” he continues like he hasn’t done a thing, and she stares at him aghast.

“That’s… not something I’ve ever been disposed to,” she murmurs as if being run like an automaton, wondering how many things they’re really talking about, or if this is his retaliation against her teasing. After all, he’s engaged in the games just as much as she has. Yet he’s calm, seemingly unperturbed as he offers her the makings of a smile that could inspire her to do something she’s promised herself not to – at least, not first.

“I can help you with that,” he delivers in a way that’d scandalise any sane person in a hundred miles – unfortunately there are none – only to conclude, “- later,” before setting off into the neatly lined trees that stretch out in front of them.

Watching him stroll away from her in a disbelieving daze, she’s struck by a bolt of recognition in wondering if this could be what he’s been feeling like all this time, and if so, how in the world he lasted so long.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaand we return to regular chapters... by which I mean, chock full of agonisingly
escalating sexual tension that doesn't go anywhere because these two are *far* too stubborn to just... play nice.

I'm not much into that 'kiss once and then it's a 10 yard dash through every act under the sun on the way into bed' style of shipping anyway (at least not in this case), it takes all the fun of excruciating awkwardness and uncertainty out of the equation. And that *is* what we're here for, of course. To be tortured.

Seeya next week ;)

P.s. 'Unashamedly adversarial posturing' is another one of my favourite 3-word combos for this fic, there's been at least one previously but I can't think of it right now.
The Thirtieth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily fights dirty. Daud is not impressed.

Chapter Notes

WELP I FINALLY HIT THE 'POST WITHOUT PREVIEW' BUTTON INSTEAD OF 'SAVE AS A DRAFT' and then didn't want to confuse people by deleting a chapter just to re-upload it once I've edited it more thoroughly so.... things will have changed just a touch since I first hit that button (I think with timezones most people won't notice anyway), like there being a summary now, and a few tweaks here and there. Also notes. So if you can see those then it's fine.

It was only a matter of time before this happened tbh. The mistake with the posting, I mean. Though also the rest of this too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emily’s next attempt to make Daud the victim of his own training takes place as the sun is passing through the most aggressive stage of its cycle. Though it rained only last night and the wind is a welcome mediation on the heat, its rays are no less fierce so she’s forced to confine the methodical stalking of her prey to strategic patches of shade.

One such location is the stretch alongside the garden wall, which sits far enough from the rest of the grounds that there’s little chance of being seen from afar – unless he happens to be on the roof of the house – and where his approach can only indicate one destination.

The only real disadvantage is the relative comfort of the earthy groove and her consequential propensity to fall asleep during the prolonged waits that make up this cat-and-mouse game. Fortunately her ability to snooze in the soporific heat doesn’t override her programming to respond to the flip-flap of sandals heralding his approach, which rouses her instinctively. She turns over and gets to her feet with care, holding her breath like so many coins clenched in a fist, tracking him up the single path as she creeps closer to the end of the wall.

Hearing the door open, she waits until the sound of wood scuffing over earth stops and then peers around the corner, treading quickly but carefully over rain-softened ground that muffles her footsteps as she sneaks up to the doorway and slips through the half-open door less than two paces behind him. Her father would be proud she’s sure, though whether it’ll extend to Daud remains to be seen.

Unfortunately she only gets one more pace in before he wheels around on her and she’s no longer able to decide for herself when the right ‘moment’ is. She lunges at him only to find he’s doing the same, and with greater mass and force barrels into her like a freight train and easily drives her towards the wall.
She manages to stay out of his grasp, but only just, and without much space to manoeuvre in finds herself quickly backing into the irrigation system that stands along the inside wall of the garden; it doesn’t amount to much more than a shelf of buckets and connected hoses, but there’s a tell-tale wobble that promises they’re full from the recent storm.

The entire structure shakes and recoils back in the direction it was pushed, causing rainwater from an overfull bucket behind her to jolt over its brim and slosh across Daud’s face like she’s emptied a drink over him. The disgruntled look it evokes is pure comedy and an uncontrollable belt of laughter bursts out of her, but before she can do anything else the rig suddenly gives.

His hands shoot up to grab the edge of the shelf before it drops, but this provides too much of an opportunity not to take advantage of, so with a mind cut for victory she moves forward and reaches for his neck – their unequivocal point of surrender. She meets his eyes knowing exactly what choice he has to make, but in a telling display of what really matters to him he lets go of the shelf to knock her away, permitting a large bucket of water to tip straight down her back, almost hitting her if she wasn’t still moving toward him like a runaway carriage.

The rest of the containers stacked along the now-defunct system similarly dump their contents on the recently-dug earth that stretches the length of the modest garden, which quickly turns to mud as she grapples with him. She looses her footing, caught between avoiding the rest of the rigging as it collapses around them and Daud’s hands as he tries to restrain her, but makes sure to grab hold of him as she falls, giving a calculated jerk that ensures that if she’s going down she’ll damn-well take him with her.

She lands on her back and rolls out of the way moments before he comes down straight on top of her, coating herself in a nearly complete layer of muck but escaping what would be a definitive loss in being pinned. Springing back up as he catches himself just off the ground on iron-like arms, flexing into a push-up away from the newly formed swamp underneath them, she lunges for his throat but he raises a hand to shove her away just as she makes contact, finding her fingers slip over him more than she anticipates. He shunts onto his knees as she continues to go for him, ripping her hands off him every time she gets purchase, finally restraining filthy wrists in a firm grip and holding her away with a look uncannily like Callista’s most fearsome disapproval.

“Are you quite finished?” he remarks with mud flecked across his face, clinging to his hair, and a tell-tale ring of messy finger-marks around his collar. She ruthlessly puts down a thought of what such handprints could look like elsewhere – like the stretch of his chest visible through the open collar of his shirt, window to a dusting of wiry hair she somehow hasn’t noticed before.

“If I’d been armed I would’ve got you,” she says like she’s covering for something.

“Then come at me armed,” he retorts, letting her go and glaring at his hands as if they weren’t already dirty. “I’m not judging you on your theoretical ability with a weapon.”

“Really?” she comments wrly. “We’re back to me trying to kill you?”

He gives a throaty chuckle, then reaches out ostensibly to wipe something from her cheek, which of course most likely leaves an ugly smear instead. Perhaps that’s the point, she considers, and that he might also be occupied with the thoughts of marking the ruddy earth inspires. If he left marks everywhere he’d touched her outside of conflict, she’d still be plenty filthy.

“You can’t kill me yet, highness,” he lilts in a tone so dangerously fond tone it lights her up inside. She wonders if he’s struggling not to do something as much as she is – and if so, why isn’t he doing it? “Though you’re welcome to try,” he invites, getting up with filthy knees and wiping a couple of handprints onto the front of his shirt.
“You make it tempting sometimes,” she comments, sitting more comfortably and trying to look composed for a person covered almost head to toe in dusky red mud.

“That was better, by the way,” he offers as he paces over to the collapsed irrigation system and starts methodically picking up the pieces, like he hasn’t just invited her to kill him and she hasn’t teasingly insinuated she might. “However, you’re still letting me choose when to take you on.” Nothing will stop him trying to lecture her, it seems.

“You turned around,” she retorts cattily. “What was I supposed to do, disappear?”

“If I turned around you waited too long,” he says in a way that couldn’t possibly be any more infuriating.

“Well which is it?” she snaps. “Too long or not long enough?”

“Depends on the situation,” he answers in an imprecise drawl. “It takes some practice, knowing when to seize the moment.” He’s all about the right moments, she despairs.

“A wonderfully informative lesson,” she remarks dryly – about the only thing that still is – and starts inspecting herself with a long-wearing sigh. She hasn’t the wardrobe to do this every time she wants to take a shot at him. “This was my last good shirt, I’ll have you know.” The stare that she fixes him with takes some time to be noticed, preoccupied as he seems to be with the state of his garden.

“And you’re looking at me like it was my fault because-?” he eventually inquires, sounding nonplussed by the whole ordeal even if he’s only half the mess she is.

“You dropped a bucket of water on me,” she points out.

“You bumped into it,” he retorts. “I merely let it fall.”

“A fine defence,” she spits. “What court could convict you?” He chuckles and then sinks onto his knees, pushing his hands into the soft ground to channel away the flooding around some of the sprouting crops, but spares her a look that seems to get stuck like she’s pasted with adhesive rather than mud.

“There are some exercises you can do that’ll help at this stage,” he murmurs in a throaty tone that she doesn’t usually find in his tutoring sessions, “but you might want to clean up first.”

“I just told you I haven’t anything else to wear,” she snaps, even though it’s not strictly true.

“Then wash in what you’ve got,” he retorts grumpily. “Isn’t that what you usually do?”

“And just what is your problem with that?” she invites flippantly, seeing as they’re ripping things out of the ground.

“With you parading around soaking wet damn-near all the time?” He turns up to offer a glance that makes her bite her lower lip in anticipation of what comes next, which arrives in perfect timing with the drop in her stomach. “It’s distracting.”

“Oh,” she murmurs, hyper-aware of the feeling of the mixture drying against her skin like the sun is going to set her into a statue. Then for reasons she doesn’t analyse too closely, follows up with, “How?”

He makes a grumbling sound that comes from his throat without lips moving, and continues staring
determinedly at the earth under his hands.

“I’m not playing that game, Emily,” he murmurs in a way that’s more ominous than everything else – tread carefully, it says, just because he’s admitted an attraction to her doesn’t mean he’s going to behave any less like his oft-surly and no-nonsense self.

She watches a string of birds cross the sky in the distance, taking a moment to breathe as she contemplates the peculiarity of not being pursued the way that other admirers would and had – and why that’s such a bitter pill to swallow. Even with his inclinations for her, for lack of a better word, his knees are far too stiff to bend easily, which is unfortunately exactly what she wants.

“All right, Daud,” she returns, getting to her feet with her gaze to the top of his head, spying on thinning hair as he pulls unrecognisable vegetables from the mire and throws them to one side. It’s no 'yes Daud', but is at least moderately sincere. “I’ll clean up, if it’ll help you be less distracted.”

“Good,” he murmurs like he doesn’t mean a word of it.

Freed from any concerns about Daud making an untimely appearance in the course of cleaning herself up – she should be so lucky – and faced with the innate difficulty of trying to wash mud from a shirt while she's still in it, Emily finally resorts to stripping it off. She scrubs away what she can of the ruddy earth from her last unspoiled clothing with the sun on her bare back, threatening to burn if she stays in it too long.

However, the feeling of skin liberated to the air after nigh-on three weeks of confinement is so refreshing she takes to washing in such a state on impulse, scaling the wall with an overfull bucket of water balanced between her head and hand like something wild. Only her father might recognise the rogue spirit as she clambers around the brickwork and scrubs herself half naked under invigoratingly cold water; it’s the same child who had loved camping in the forests and hills of Gristol – playing at being an adventurer in the times before her Crown became quite so heavy.

She flings the excess water out of her shirt spinning it like a banner, still stained with lines of dusky red but no helping that now, and then slips it on damp over her shoulders. She's loath to relinquish the comfort denied by overly precise tailoring – understands why Daud's are so oversized now – and declines to do up more than the middle button, pulling it together just enough to cover her more-or-less modestly.

Try this for distraction, she thinks with almost shameful spite as she heads back in the direction of the garden, only to spot Daud leaving it for the house, arms full with as much as he can carry.

Rather than follow him, she pulls the other way and circles round the house to approach him on the other side, hidden around the corner waiting for the timer of his footsteps to tell her when to dash at him.

She believes she times it right, because she arrives at his back just before he walks inside, unaware of her until she’s almost on top of him. However, the hand that reaches for him is wrapped in a firm grip before she can even make contact, flinging her in a semi-circle as the armful of vegetables fall and throwing her back against the outside wall by the time they hit the floor. No sooner has she recovered from the impact than he has her wrists held firm under each of his hands.

“Nice try,” he mutters what might be sarcastically, but she's somewhat preoccupied with the practicalities of their position to pay much attention to the subtleties of his tone – not when he's got her up against a wall after everything that's happened between them.
“Go on then,” she urges, and delights in the spark of confusion it conducts across his face. Perhaps it's childish to play with him so gratuitously, but she's not much for resisting temptation. This time all she wants is the worry in his expression – to know she can throw him off – then fires, “Tell me what I did wrong,” like tossing a fish back. “Was I too soon or too late?” she queries facetiously. “Or perhaps I choose the wrong moment altogether?”

“Actually, you did everything right this time,” he replies in a way that might be sincerely complimentary, running against the grain of her expectations yet again. “You're just dealing with me,” he adds luridly, definitely leaning in closer to her than he was before, “and didn't get lucky.” He can play at this game too, of course, so though the pressure on her wrists remains the same, the space between them is crushing.

“Don't be so sure,” she snaps, then quick as a whip cranes her neck forward – even though she resolved to herself not to – and kisses him; like the times before, but also not at all. She hadn't wanted to do this back then for any reason except gaining a strategic advantage, and while that goal remains unchanged there's the not-so-insignificant current that flows between them like an overcharged arc pylon.

It's also distinctly more engaging when he kisses back. Which, he does. After taking the force of her lips on his like a punch, he's soon pushing into her as if she's popped the cork out of him like a bottle of Morley's finest champagne. His execution is practised and methodical, like everything about him, angling into her and closing the space between their bodies in a way that's almost but not quite familiar.

She can't quite place, or maybe just admit to, why it's so gratifying to let him fall into her like deep waters, only that it feels like something she's entitled to. And it’s power, how a simple gesture can so quickly unlock the manacles of his hands over her wrists, sliding palm over palm until his fingers weave between hers. Still holding her in place, but as if he needs to control what she does to him.

It's been one of his own lessons to take advantages wherever they lie, and if he isn't weak to her like this. So weak, in fact, that when one kiss has run unceremoniously into another she dares to escalate by moving on him with lips parted, waiting until his mouth opens enough to curiously trace her tongue over the tip of his.

He shudders in a way he didn't even when she stabbed him, and seizing the moment when it's so clearly ripe she hooks a foot behind one of his ankles and pushes on the opposing hand to flip him like a domino along the wall. He's so disarmed that it happens without their even coming apart, then it's his back landing against the brickwork as one of her hands descends the taut length of arms and settles around his throat, and only then does she pull back with a winning grin in place.

“See what I mean?” she taunts, finishing less sure than she starts when she registers the long shadow cast by his foreboding expression.

“That's not going to work on most,” he says in a raw tone that she suspects is far from the way he'd actually like to respond.

“I thought I was dealing with you?” she retorts bitterly. “Which is it, Daud? You can't keep changing the rules so I always lose.”

“You're not losing,” is his hoarse response, and it's abundantly clear how he means it. It’s been her unofficial mission to break him, after all, though she's starting to misplace the reasons or ways she wants him broken.
The shape of her hand around his neck transitions from purely combative into something nearly soft enough to be affection, relaxing to him as he’s done to her – a process imperceptible at first but now quite clear. She takes the rapidly hammering throb of his pulse out of instinct initially, then remains pressed down over the yielding flesh where she can feel his heartbeat race, relishing that she’s the reason why.

There's a moment when something in his face makes her think he’s about to flip back and move on her – better by far than a simple response to her initiation – when from a distance comes a distinct but unmistakable ringing, and the moment passes.

“Bells?” she queries in her distraction, catching him in almost profile as he gazes up the slope at the approach to the house.

“Hm,” he answers vaguely, a pensive knot forming between his brows as he continues, “I know who that’ll be.”

For reasons that can best be attributed to the gross deviation from what she considers the sphere of his predictability, there’s only one word in his answer that she fixes on, which she parrots like a bird as a curious lowing rings out across the grounds.

“What?”

Chapter End Notes

For reasons I cannot explain the unofficial theme song of this chapter is 'Domino' by Jessie J. Possibly because of the one line that uses domino imagery, but there's also a whole thematic thing happening too. After all the crushing pressure it's nice to have some lighthearted(ish?) fun and games and mud wrasling, heh.
The Thirty-First Lesson

Chapter Summary

Just when she thinks that she might know who Daud is, he turns into something else.

Chapter Notes

Early update! I'm about to knock off on a beach trip and thought it'd be wise to get this update out before rather than after, these chapters have really been some of the easiest to work with in the editing stage so I'm pretty relaxed about slamming them up as'n'when. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emily’s first reaction to the completely unanticipated scenario of Daud having a known visitor interrupting his supposedly absolute isolation is to hastily button up her mud-stained shirt while rueing the fact that he didn’t even notice. So much for his distraction.

She next wonders exactly what kind of person could be approaching his house – and to see him, no less. She can make out a wagon pulling up from over the ridge, spying around the corner of the house lest she be spotted from afar.

The ringing comes from a cluster of cattle, two bulls pulling the cart as the rest of the herd plod alongside with clanking bells around their necks. A small dark shape cuts around and between their spindly cream legs as they roam down the hillside while the proprietor strolls out to meet this unlikely calling party. At the front of the wagon sits a portly woman whose voice resonates with the timbre of the bells that accompany her arrival.

“Daaaaaa-ud,” she calls out in a soulful pitch, following with an utterly unintelligible string of sounds thereafter as she catches sight of him.

He answers the woman in similarly mysterious form; something passably similar to her initial inquiry, a word – or sentence, it’s hard to tell. She responds more elaborately in the strange tongue as the herd comes to a stop on a shallow patch of land near the house.

The cattle, including a doe-eyed calf, begin to scatter and attack the scrubby plants with their wide, brown noses. The dog that’s been weaving around them bounds up to Daud with sure recognition, planting paws on his chest and inviting the incomprehensible scolding of its master; a woman of indiscriminate middle-or-older age, round-faced wearing a curious long robe and headdress made from colourful twists of fabric.

Ruffling the sleek black creature behind its ears before repeating a command that sets the dog’s front paws back on the ground, Daud steps up and offers a hand to the woman as she climbs down from the raised seat at the front of the wagon. She doesn’t come any higher than his shoulders once she’s on the ground, but grabs him by them all the same to assertively pull him down and plant a kiss firmly on each of his cheeks – something he accepts with surprising grace; it is perhaps not
universal that he should be so withdrawn from physical contact, she thinks with a sting.

There isn’t a part of the exchange that she can make head or tale of, still hidden around the corner of the house trying to piece together snatches of the conversation that passes back and forth between them in a language unlike any she’s heard. Then out of the chaotic noise – more greatly supplied by the woman than Daud – he suddenly speaks in the common tongue.

“You can come out, you know,” he delivers like it’s the most natural thing in the world, and it takes Emily a moment to realise he must be addressing her.

“Is that wise?” she replies cautiously from her retreat; she could cover her face as she’s been taught – at least by everyone except him – but that would surely be even more conspicuous than her loitering already is.

“Who you are is of no significance to her,” he calls back incredulously.

Cautiously trusting him to protect her identity, or maybe just letting curiosity get the better of her, she emerges into the open. The woman makes an *auuwh*-ing sound followed by commentary she can’t follow at all as she skulks into view, save that she knows it’s inquiry about her in a language so foreign to anything she’s acquainted with that it leaves her completely and detestably lost. Daud shakes his head and makes a clear sound of denial, only for the woman to come back again more insistently, at which he continues shaking his head through a worrying uncomfortable chuckle.

“What’s she saying?” she demands, unable to divine the meaning by herself and increasingly worried she’s been recognised.

He gives her a caged look before reluctantly translating, “She’s asking if you’re my wife.”

“Oh,” she responds with dumbfounded shock, putting to rest the theories she was developing about him trying to convince the woman she’s not the Empress, then looks square at the woman before emphatically shaking her own head, which only seems to make her laugh.

She then posits something to Daud who gives another nervous chuckle, only to find himself caught between a rock and a hard place when he glances back at Emily and comes up against an even harsher look.

“Explain,” she demands curtly.

“She asks… why not,” he murmurs over a strangled clearing of his throat, and then to the additional spree of chatter that comes from the woman thereafter continues, “and if not, what’re you doing here?”

“You haven’t explained on my behalf?” she suggests wryly, sensitive to the vast barrier that language has afforded between herself this unexpected new presence in his world.

“What should I say?” he responds with untampered honesty, and it’s only then that she realises he’s unsure how to account for her, not wanting – or perhaps knowing – what words to put on it.

“Tell her… you’re a friend of my father’s,” she issues stiffly, at which he lifts an eyebrow.

“He almost killed me.” And vice-versa, for that matter.

“How else do you think he makes friends?” she retorts, and he gives a pitying shrug before turning to the woman to explain.
He speaks in what she can at least recognise as a less polished version of the language than the woman uses, who gives a lively laugh and follows up with something that concludes with her nudging him with an elbow in a tone that could be construed as suggestive. With the practically bashful denial that she can recognise coming from him thereafter, she’s left with no doubts about who and in what capacity is being discussed, though to hell if she understands the specifics.

“She doesn’t speak any of the common tongue?” she hazards on a limb, hoping against better belief that asking might merit some reward.

“Far from common where she hails from,” he replies a little tersely, even scolding perhaps, though she only uses the affirmed name – though affirmed by who, she dares to consider.

“What language is it, then?” she asks a little more softly.

“An old Pandyssian dialect, now lost to all except merchants and sailors across the isles,” he answers between snatches of an ongoing conversation with the woman that might be about the bulls that he’s set to unfastening from the cart – or anything, for that matter.

“Then why do you speak it?” she demands.

“It was my mother’s tongue,” he delivers firmly enough to be considered sharp, if she were of a mind to take offense instead of being consumed by how little she still knows of him. “Though I’d forgotten much, until she showed up and gave me little choice but to relearn.”

“I see,” she answers, unsure how to proceed when she knows how far direct questioning is likely to get her. “What brings her here?”

“She trades across the isles, following an old route through the hills on her way to Karnaca,” he explains.

“Surely it’s faster by sea?” she queries incredulously. The difficulty of navigating the mountainous interior of Serkonos is evident by the fact that Daud’s isolated retreat is somehow on the way enough to call into. Though she’s aware from her education that Karnaca was once even more influential than Dunwall, sitting at the crux of a great trading route across the continents in ages long passed, and when the technology to travel against the winds hadn’t existed it may well have been easier to make such an arduous trek.

“They prefer the land where possible,” he remarks with a gesture for the cattle, which have spread out somewhat but not ventured too far from one another, lest they be rounded back by the dog that seems deeply suspicious of her, showing only passing interest and none of the affection it directed toward Daud. “And she prefers the old way.”

“How often does she make the trip?”

“Once each way in a year, on the winds,” he answers. The woman has left their immediate vicinity to go to the back of the wagon, though Emily catches a keen eye observing them now and again.

“Will she stay long?”

“A night or so,” he replies, and gives her a curious look. “That alright?” It’s not a request for permission, but a probe of a far more subtle kind. This is his house after all.

“Of course,” she replies hurriedly. “Tell her I’m… pleased to make her acquaintance.”

He appears to translate, but the trader pops her head out from the back of the wagon to offer a full-
bellied laugh and a comment that inspires a suspiciously frustrated response from Daud.

“Did I say something amusing?” she queries self-consciously, having never been so lost in a conversation that’s so undeniably about her.

“No,” he soothes. “She’s just…” he stalls, rubbing his fingers over the bridge of his nose in a telling way, “recommending I marry before I get too old.”

Finally, Emily laughs.

The arrival of a new face with a wagon full of goods from more civilised parts of the country brings a flurry of activity to Daud’s peaceful retreat, which he and their purveyor seem intent to barter down to the last grain – this is the mysterious source of the goods he can’t produce. Spices, liquor, even shirts come from the back of her cart in exchange for hotly contested baskets of produce from his farmstead, seeing off most of the much-loathed dried peaches, which she’s nothing but thrilled to see the back of.

However, he decides the midst of these negotiations is a perfect opportunity for Emily to practice the art of **patience**, politely suggesting in the bluntest terms possible that this could be a good time for her to wrap her head around the ‘exercises in waiting’ he spoke of. She finds herself intensely suspicious of his insistence of this lesson being necessary **now**, especially with his apparent irritation at every subsequent interruption of his gesticulating haggling with the woman to stay abreast of the situation. She only wants to understand what’s going on, as dependent as she is on him for translation, but he’s quite clearly committed to argument with the new arrival rather than explaining it to her.

Struggling with the concept of whether she can actually be **envious** of a jolly middle-aged woman that her mother’s murder is currently debating how many figs are equal to a cigar, she resolves that it’s surely best not to get into such troublesome considerations when she’s already had to deny being married to him several times. One of the few words she **does** appear to be picking up in the language is ‘wife’, she’s reasonably confident, and it’s come up more times than Daud has issued the denial she’s also come to recognise.

His instruction in this new exercise is infuriatingly simple. “Sit still.”

“That’s all?” she replies frostily, more than a little displeased by his hiding behind the programme as a way of getting her off his hands. As is the fashion, she wants anything that he’ll try to deny her – particularly his attention, which after being the sole focus of for so long she’s unused to having to **compete** for.

“Exactly,” he responds. “You can’t listen properly until you learn how to be quiet.”

“I know how to be quiet,” she shoots, but he lifts an eyebrow at her and everything else she’s about to say gets stuck in her throat.

“Quiet is different to silent,” he remarks studiously, avoiding a descent into quips that might suggest she’s successfully distracting him from his purpose. “Mind and body must both be still.”

“So you want me to meditate?” she surmises.

“Then you are familiar with the basics,” he replies so dryly she feels as if she’s scraped past with the bare minimum of his expectations.
“Sort of,” she admits, and somehow it’s worse than if she’d just said no. Some had tried to teach her the art, but the discipline had never stuck – emptying her mind seems futile when there’s always so much to consider. “It’s dull.”

For reasons she can’t explain, one side of his mouth turns up in a worryingly amused smirk before he remarks, “Then you aren’t doing it right.”

“Isn’t that what you’re here to help me with – teacher?” she poses, pausing before the address for just long enough to wet her lips with her tongue.

She watches him swallow, Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat, and is quietly confident her choice of words has hit the mark. They don’t acknowledge this truth of her training as often as it’d merit, but she doesn’t always have to look like she’s winning to get one up on him. She’s beginning to realise anything that gives her a kick in the gut is highly likely to do the same for him – perhaps even moreso.

“If you can’t sit quietly, there’s something else you can try,” he announces, turning his gaze out over the grounds. “Step forward, with your feet apart.” She raises her eyebrows but does as he instructs – habit-forming as it is. “Wider,” he demands, and with a huff she throws a foot even further out in front of her. “Good,” he murmurs in that insidiously commanding rasp, and then without forewarning shoves her back foot with his to change the angle. “Hold your arms out, shoulders flat.” Bemused as to exactly what he’s trying to do with her, she puts out her arms like a scarecrow - almost like posture training – and continues fixing him with a deeply sceptical look.

“Bend this leg.” Two fingers brush against the clothing gripping her thigh, and though meant to be a purely indicative touch, it’s hard to ignore everything else the contact inspires. Slowly she bends her front leg into a shallow not-quite lunge, wondering where he’s going with this even as the instructions keep arriving. “Back foot strong. Look forward.” She does this last part more reluctantly, as it impairs her ability to give him critical stares, but nevertheless turns to face out over the groves of trees in front of her.

“What is this meant to achieve?” she queries, only to twitch when his fingertips make purchase on either side of her waist, then with the barest touch – like he’s using the lightest possible contact – turns her hips to face forward, in line with her head. It’s a simple adjustment, but she can feel the tension where it pulls her body in places it’s unused to. That he’ll lay his hands on her for the sake of this but apparently no other reason is an undeniable annoyance.

“Now stay like that,” he declares, and his voice is flat as ever, but there is static in the space between them that she knows he’s surely noticed too, given his part in generating it.

“For how long?”

“As long as you can,” he replies. “If it gets really unbearable, you may turn around and face the other way.”

“What?” she snaps, turning to look at him and not missing the suggestion of what she may do with a buck like a horse, but the grate of his disapproving scowl is enough to drive her eyes back to the front.

“A little exertion should help you focus,” he remarks deviously. “If you can’t stand any longer then feel free to sit down and see if it’s any less dull.” It’s peculiar gazing into the distance as his voice rattles behind her, deliberately not looking, but even stranger is the fact that on some level she trusts the advice will go somewhere. He hasn’t steered her wrong yet, not as far as her training goes at least, so she carries on staring doggedly ahead even as her muscles begin to burn. “Only
when your mind is quiet will you be listening deeply enough to recognise the moment when it comes,” he concludes, touching a single finger under her back arm, raising it up from where it flags. “I’ll be back.”

She’s disgusted by the gratification hearing him say it gives her, but embracing the dynamic – like maybe she wants to keep who and what she’s supposed to be to him firm in his mind while he returns to his other business – answers dutifully.

“Yes, Daud.”

Chapter End Notes

Aha she FINALLY said (and meant) it!!! Only took.... 7 odd chapters from when it was mentioned.

There's all kinds of stuff I've made up around Pandyssian culture and Daud's connection with it (his mom is from the Pandyssian isles and conceived him on a ship so that's about 99% of my canon reference material) that I could talk about, but instead I'm gonna mention that for any Yoga people... yeah, that's a Warrior pose he's got her doing.

I mentioned moving to Asia in some a/n a while ago, and in early stages of that move I was doing a lot of yoga in Bangkok and not much else and this idea came to me during a savasana (yeah that's genuinely about how big the backlog between what's written/posted is, heh). I tend to share Emily's opinions on meditation, but can begrudgingly appreciate its purpose and merits when I have to.

The trader woman I had as a fixture in my mind for a while, but she developed a lot after I went hiking around the countryside in Myanmar and is strongly influenced by a lady I met who ran one of the lunch spots on day 3 or so of a 5 day hike. Extremely jolly, didn't speak a lick of English and the only person I've ever seen coach a local-language thank you out of my super-stubborn travelling companion. A truly powerful being.

Important reference image (from the same trek) for this chapter: (https://scontent.frn3-1.fna.fbcdn.net/v/t31.0-8/15975148_10155238990845681_1231305335384969997_o.jpg?oh=ec72e42fa20a8e819ad5fec1104a3064&oe=592B357E)
The Thirty-Second Lesson

Chapter Summary

Getting to grips with this curious new Daud while trying not to strangle the old one.

Chapter Notes

This update comes from a town called Pyin Oo Lwin in a guest house room with more limited editing than usual - I'm training myself not to agonise too much over this stuff and *relax* a bit more. Easier said than done.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

While there are any number of things that Emily would rather do, some more recently even involving him, than admit Daud is right, the tincture is becoming marginally less bitter each time she takes it. She’s discovered that at least with regards to the programme, his lectures and exercises invariably match up with the points he’s making. In this case holding herself in a warrior-like pose for no less than an hour.

The strain swallows all other thoughts like quicksand as she pushes herself to maintain the position he plied her into with gentle touches even when her body is aching and sweat rolls off her. She swaps from side to side occasionally but only releases when she fears fainting, and though Daud has not yet returned – can be heard still hotly debating with his vendor on the other side of the house – she doesn’t deviate from instructions and merely sits down when she can no longer stand. Perhaps also because she’s tired.

She settles on the floor, crossing legs that cry with relief as she relieves them of the burden of her static weight, prickly sweat evaporating off her skin. She sets her hands loosely on top of her knees and heaves a deep breath, letting her eyelids droop until they’re fully closed. The winds that followed the rain are starting to wane but still possess enough strength to rustle the crawling vine-flowers of the terrace, stirring whatever hasn’t been beaten down by the storm. A pile of debris at the end of the patio tells her he’s swept it already today, long before she made an appearance.

She tunes into his voice from afar; shaped into unfamiliar sounds as he negotiating for goods from a world he’s supposedly left behind. If even he can’t exist without a tenuous connection to reality – some way of accessing the things this garden of paradise can’t produce – then surely no one can.

Except these are thoughts she’s trying to leave behind, she remembers as if he’s embossed the lesson in her mind. So although she can’t quite stop the train in its tracks, she discourages herself from listening too closely to the internal chatter, paying attention instead to their unintelligible discourse without trying to decipher. Eventually the noise melt into the gentle clanking of cowbells and calls of birds, taking in the soundscape as a whole; she doesn’t know if it really works, but wouldn’t call it dull so perhaps isn’t doing it completely wrong.

The sound of approaching footsteps sparks a flurry of speculation and tempts her to open her eyes to investigate further, but she holds onto the fact that this exercise is about the so-called ‘right
moment’, which is unlikely to take place while he’s still busy with the trader. Imagining his reprimand for reacting too soon, she resists temptation and remains fixed in place as if she’s a part of the landscape, while the paired footsteps come by her without the chatter ceasing.

Deliberately not contemplating – or attempting to, at least – whether they might be talking about her, she focuses on the draw and release of her breath like there’s nothing else that could occupy her interest, the world flowing around her like a rock in a stream. Eventually the pattern deviates of its own volition – Daud’s steps part from the woman’s and get closer to her, but she continues biding her time, holding on and waiting for the moment to ripen.

Not yet, she tells herself as she feels his shadow fall over her, because there’s not a chance in hell that it isn’t intentional and she refuses to step into such a clear trap. Even that thought – that he’s testing, baiting her – is something she allows to pass for once, ignoring it much like the fizzing in her stomach as she stands off against him, waiting with her eyes closed for his precious damned moment.

It comes with the sensation of body warmth just barely making contact with the middle of her forehead. Knowing where he is and what he’s poised to do, she pulls her head back at the same time as moving a hand like lightning to grab his wrist – square in front of her, where he’s as good as told her he is – and opens her eyes to level a cutting gaze at him, holding his hand a short space away from her forehead, like he was reaching out to brush her mind’s eye with his fingertips.

“That’s more like it,” he gives in a complimentary murmur, shattering any peace of mind she’s managed to capture and making her heart thump even louder in her ears, adrenaline coursing through her like she’s been generating charge through inactivity. “Take that from reaction to action and you’ll have it,” he continues like he’s not catalysing ever-more volatile reactions in her.

“Easier said than done,” she replies primly, releasing his wrist and setting her hand back on a knee. She could get up and find somewhere else to practice stillness, but isn’t quite convinced that she can do so without wincing and she’s not telegraphing her exhaustion to him if she can help it.

Without the trader in sight she appears to have regained her position as the centre of his focus, lingering close to her like a moth round a candle. Except she’d have burned down to the wick with how long he’s left her unattended; he can’t set her aside when she’s an annoyance and come back around when it suits him. She retaliates to such neglect by remaining seated, stiff-backed as she lowers her eyes to a half-cast droop.

“You’ll manage,” he remarks like she’s ever indicated a need for his encouragement, but quickly considers that it may have nothing to do with her desires when his fingers find their way to the collar of her shirt, stiffened with clayish soil that wouldn’t fully wash out. He picks it up in such a way his fingertips graze her collar, rubbing the fabric between them before thoughtfully remarking in a way that she is certain must be deliberately inflammatory, “You haven’t failed to impress me yet.”

She swipes for his arm like another heartbeat of him holding onto her might be too much to bear, completely undecided about what she’ll do if she catches him.

“Ah ah,” he scolds almost playfully as he snatches his hand back even quicker, and the scowl she flings at him only seems to amuse even more. It was too obvious an opportunity, something he doesn’t even need to say for her to recognise.

“I’ll get you next time,” she mutters ominously, returning her hand to her knee like she’s forgotten everything except this seated pose and how to be antagonistically still.
“Hm,” he murmurs approvingly as his name comes echoing from the distance – the trader has no qualms about calling to him as loudly and frequently as she pleases, and more outraging yet he answers like an agreeable man.

But before he goes, he manages to trace the back of his fingers over a stretch of her neck as he leans into her briefly to offer, “I look forward to it,” like he’s got any right to talk to her like that – or her gut has any reason to tie itself in knots when he does.

The only compromise Emily makes to her exercise in mindfulness is moving closer to one of the posts of the trellis, leaning back against the sun-bleached wood and only napping a very small amount as she lets the rest of the afternoon drift past her like a slow-moving river. Finally a disruption comes to her quiet, which though it’s from the only logical source is nevertheless unexpected.

“Emily,” Daud’s voice sounds out, and she catches a sunbeam across her face on lazily opening her eyes. He’s around the front of the house and doesn’t go around calling her name for fancy, but she’s still loath to get up.

“Yes?” she replies drowsily, quite content where she is and not entirely convinced that she’s motivated enough to go anywhere in a hurry – not to be linguistically lost and paid no heed.

“Come,” follows in a singular and ever-so-slightly smarting demand. It’s curiosity rather than obligation that motivates her to climb onto her own feet like scaling a mountain, legs stiffer than she anticipated as she rounds the house to discover Daud and his trader each holding several reams of fabric.

“What?” she asks a little caustically, but if he notices then doesn’t acknowledge it.

“Which do you like?” he puts to her instead, and it takes a moment for her to register he’s talking about the wadded lengths balanced preciously in one arm, while the woman forcefully offers another to him in spite of looking like he’s already got several more than he can manage.

“Really?” she blurts out of sheer disbelief. “That’s what you called me over for?” He gives her a look that she can’t read at first, drawing the conclusion that it’s some form of confusion mixed with the distraction caused by the peppering of discourse that the trader lobbies at him.

The cloths are all wound around planks of wood, folded over themselves but wide enough for the various woven and printed patterns to be displayed. One particularly vivid print is the same material that the trader wears as a head-scarf, an alarming blend of orange and green. They’re far from the muted blocks of colour and delicate embroidered designs that dominate the fashions of Dunwall, as foreign as the language of their purveyor, but are pleasing in their own right – though she might not be so bold as to don them herself.

She casts her eye over a bolt at the bottom of the stack in Daud’s arms that doesn’t dazzle quite so much; a natural off-tone white that’s as close as can be gotten without chemical bleaching dotted with a curling shapes between elaborate borders in a deep red. It’s probably the least colourful thing on show, and her favourite by far.

“That one,” she answers with a mechanical nod, like selecting tablecloths or drapes for some new occasion at the tower. “The red.”

As much as she tried to delegate, it meant so damn much to designers to have their work personally
selected, not to mention they would charge at least double for anything not hand-picked by the Empress herself. She’s expended an astonishing amount of her worthless time choosing swatches for various formal occasions to conserve a much-stretched state budget, which isn’t a skill she ever expected to need here.

He shuffles her choice to the top and pulls out an armful carelessly, holding it up like he’s trying to read some insight of her character off the lattice-like border, then hands it to the woman without a word before unceremoniously shoving the rest of the reams on the back of the wagon. The trader chatters to him while unfurling folds of the fabric over one arm before cutting it with a practiced slide of a blade, but keeps glancing at Emily in a way that makes her feel rather put-upon. Trust the only company she’s had aside from her mother’s murdered to be someone she’s utterly unable to communicate with.

“Is that all?” she remarks wryly, ready to turn heel and make for the hammock.

“Wait,” he denies her. “She’ll need some measurements.”

“Of what?” she snaps, sounding perhaps more irate than she ought to, because he finally takes stock of her mood with a puzzled look.

“You,” he answers plainly, like he can’t fathom for the life of him what she’s got to be annoyed about.

“What?” she repeats far less sharply.

“Were you not just complaining of having nothing to wear?” he points out, and it’s only then that she clocks what this exercise must be in aid of. There are no tablecloths or curtains in the house, for one.

“Surely you don’t mean…” she begins, but knowing there’s only one explanation cuts herself off. “…it’s really not necessary to-” she fumbles next, then not wanting to seem ungrateful tries to amend it and finds absolutely none of the words. “I didn’t mean to suggest it was such a pressing issue,” she finally delivers with some awkwardness. “You – she, I mean – needn’t trouble herself.”

The woman may well be demanding her own translation service, haranguing Daud who delivers disjointed, potentially uncomfortable snatches of speech in the other language and has to deal with what looks like a borderline-aggressive fallout that he uses surprisingly expressive gestures to soothe.

“It’s no trouble,” he utters like he’s buckling under the weight of a monumental verbal assault. “In fact, she insists.”

“I can pay her,” she offers with the subtlety of a gunshot to the head.

“No need,” he replies with a gently dismissive flap of his hand, markedly more animated than she’s known him to be so far.

“Well, I insist,” she asserts.

“She’s no use for your coin,” he remarks a little more curtly, like her attempts to resist the – call it what it is – gift are vexing.

“There has to be something I can offer in exchange,” she insists.

“It’s already been settled,” he replies stonily as the woman beckons her.
Not knowing how to refuse, and with Daud offering no assistance whatsoever, she feels compelled to oblige the trader and shuffles over, only to get her face clasped in a surprisingly powerful grip the moment she’s within reach.

She’s turned side to side by wiry fingers like being inspected in a way that has nothing to do with clothes fitting, and he watches a short way behind them conspicuously not translating whatever judgement has just been issued from the trader’s mouth. Maybe she’s better not knowing. However, it’s not hard to work out who is sponsoring the commission and there’s something about it that sets her teeth on edge.

“Then I’ll pay you,” she says lowly, finding herself posed like a doll as the woman puts her arms out – again, still aching from the day’s exercises – and quickly passes the fabric behind her back, wrapping it close around her chest before pulling a pin from the wrap on her head and marking the place.

“How?” he retorts, watching her get pushed and pulled around with hints of a smirk teasing the corners of his mouth. He’s no need for her coin either so for a moment she’s stumped – until she realises exactly how to get to him.

“I’m sure we can work something out,” she delivers in a way that’s undeniably flirtatious, trusting him to remember the last time she made such a promise. Except when she’d uttered those words before it hadn’t been real, as he’d so clearly found intolerable, and now the intimation is far from insincere. Although she doesn’t exactly know what she implies – just wants to inspire his imagination, which she’s a feeling doesn’t need much encouragement.

It seems effective because the stare he levels at her thereafter is so tense even the trader stills, pausing in her deft measuring of Emily to glance between them. Eventually she breaks the silence with a chuckle and indecipherable comment that has him spilling another tell-tale dismissal. Emily can guess from the context well enough what he’s so keen to deny, and it puts a gratifying grin on her face.

Quick, methodical hands dart from shoulder to shoulder, measuring her up and down like a piece of furniture to be fit into a room, marking where she ends and begins right into the red-on-cream fabric. She’s used to such sessions so isn’t too uncomfortable as she stands there like a dressmakers’ dummy, though the shove as the woman pulls the material tight around her waist is a little unexpected. She offers some comment on it to Daud, who immediately scoffs.

“What?” she demands.

“She’s just saying you clearly haven’t had any children,” he translates with a twang of amusement in his voice like a tightened harp string.

“Oh,” she replies a little awkwardly. By this age her mother had already had her, a concept that felt somewhere between alien and mortally horrifying. Though it’s not as if the pressure to secure the Kaldwin line isn’t touched upon with great regularity by her advisors – even the damn parliament have debated it. Her father is about the only person who hasn’t encouraged procreation, though he alone is more enough to hold them all off. “I suppose that enhances my suitability for marriage,” she tries to add flippantly.

“I don’t know about that,” Daud murmurs halfway under his breath without it actually being enough to escape earshot or the scathing look she gives him. Most people, most of them being creatures of flesh and blood and possessed with a traditional amount of humanity, would be falling over themselves for her at this point, yet he blows hot and cold like the month of winds.
“What’s that supposed to mean?” she inquires with a hoist of her eyebrows; he’s the one insisting on gifting her whatever this woman is taking measurements to make for her, pinning the fabric with increasingly precise movements into places in a way that make her wonder if she’s ever getting out of it.

“Hm,” he murmurs provocatively, almost like he knows she can’t get at him now – any effort to move even an inch from where she’s supposed to be has merited a stern cluck that’d put even Callista to shame. “You can be quite the handful, you know,” he adds at around the time the woman’s fingers scoop up with alarming assertiveness around her chest, cupping her breasts in a completely mechanical measurement that she’s not entirely convinced should be necessary.

Daud observes the spectacle with an expression somewhere between uncomfortable and about to burst out laughing – at least, until she tips the balance by shooting him a decidedly cheeky look and quipping, “Slightly more, actually,” in a way that wipes the smirk straight off his self-satisfied face.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaand we end on a tit joke. Really the question is why it hasn't happened sooner.
Emily finds her feelings about Daud in need of a tune-up.

These chapters just keep on getting longer... this update takes us ever-closer to the 100k mark, and believe me when I say there's plenty more to go. My control over the length of this story is 0% so it's going to take as long as it damn well pleases apparently.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emily’s fitting session ends as abruptly as it starts, with the half-assembled garment pulled over her head like being tipped out of a sack before being dismissed with a flapping of birdlike hands from her unlikely tailor. Unable to ask if there should be more and assuredly unwilling to discuss it with Daud, she retreats instead to the hammock, laying with an arm over her eyes swaying in the breeze as she drifts in and out of a nap more induced by boredom than anything else.

“Why don’t you make yourself useful,” sounds his voice out of the quiet like the grinding of an immense machine, some centuries-old ironwork groaning under its own weight. She opens an eye to catch him standing behind the table on the far side of the terrace with a veritable mountain of rescued vegetables from the garden piled before him. His idea of the ‘something’ they can work out in exchange for a garment currently being stitched by the trader with a dog sleeping across her feet differ quite wildly from even her more conservative imaginations.

She gives a pensive hum and inquires, “Can I do so without getting up?”

He gives a breathy scoff but nevertheless walks around the table and crosses the patio towards her, a knife in one hand and large sweet potato in the other. It occurs to her like some reflex she can’t overwrite that he might use this opportunity to make a point of her vulnerability, even as he grants such a whimsical request. So when he holds them out to her a little too fast she snatches instinctively for his wrist – only to find it, much to her surprise, held firmly in her grip. False alarm.

“Your instincts are much improved,” he comments in a honeyed murmur, and although there was once a time she might've wanted nothing more than such an unfettered compliment, today it prickles. He can’t just talk to her like this as he flips the handle toward her with a wrist still encircled in her fingers, only to offer the instructions, “Skin and cut out the eyes,” like the way he looks at her with his is nothing to be mentioned.

“All right,” she says instead of anything else that crosses her mind; he’s made his inclinations towards her clear enough, but she knows she can’t demand them like tribute every waking, breathing moment – as if he shouldn’t be allowed to want her only some of the time.
She’s slowly coming to terms with the fact that he does at all, though is far less comfortable with her need for it to be acknowledged – the peculiarity of craving being wanted instead of taking it for granted. He’s encouraged it with his capriciousness, she tells herself as she slices the purplish skin from the vegetable and tosses the peelings downhill, but then she’s hardly one to talk.

And none of this is anything like what she should be considering in a most unlikely of scenarios; the thought of what anyone of sound mind would make of the situation between them doesn’t bear thinking about, much less her father. Except like everything else that happens within these grounds, the consequences seem suspended from reality – contained by the disconnected magic of this place.

She finishes skinning the sweet potato and concedes to getting up to take it inside before setting herself to task on another, which she selects from the mound on the table outside as she watches him go about a routine she’s seen many times by now – in and out of the kitchen as he starts preparations for the evening meal. The extra vegetables excavated from the garden this morning won’t go to waste with another mouth around the table, at least.

“Shall I continue making myself useful?” she puts to him farcically when there’s nothing left to peel, catching him in the doorway almost like he’s looking for her, and he wordlessly beckons her in. She’s already half-way across the patio before it occurs to her how quickly things have changed to be so eagerly compliant with mere gestures when she’s supposed to be finding ways to beat this man.

Although, she considers, there’s no reason she can’t do both.

Daud sets her to chopping an endless sequence of vegetables while he works on a similarly infinite range of dishes at the stove nearby – if she’d wanted to become an apprentice chef there are other places she could’ve done so. She’s also been stubbornly ignoring a niggling thought that he’s going to much greater lengths with this meal than he ever has with the ones prepared for her, though she’s hardly been the most gracious guest.

The trader bustles in and out of the room offering an ongoing stream of commentary that she tries futilely to interpret from context alone, but if nothing else serves as a useful distraction. She is still trying to meet his latest challenge, so retains awareness of the ‘moment’ he speaks of without distracting herself from ordinary tasks. There’s something in the methodical nature of finely tuned chopping that helps her be quiet enough to truly listen as he might drolly lecture, and having a knife in her hand due to excusable circumstance helps. More helpfully yet, Daud seems far more occupied with what he’s doing than her – though not enough for her to chance her luck on just any random moment, not when she knows the razor-wire reactions he’ll unleash if she chooses wrong.

She’s been standing at the counter for what feels like hours when the moment finally ripens, which isn’t until the trader is in the storeroom-come-pantry just outside the formal boundaries of the kitchen, as she knows better than to make a move while there’s someone else in the room – assassins don’t leave witnesses. The woman lets out a sinuous call of his name that compels Daud’s head to turn instantly from the pan in his hand. Moving fast, she alights one hand on top of his shoulder for purchase and lays the edge of the knife, still wet from the flesh of what she’s been chopping – deadly sharp as he keeps all his blades – precisely against his throat, opened up to her like a party invitation as he responds to the summons.

That he freezes rather than spring into action is her best indicator of success, though if he tries anything she’ll have pressed the flat of the blade against his neck to demonstrate exactly how much
throat he’d have left if they weren’t playing – and even if he’s a tough teacher, he can admit when he’s beaten. Mostly.

“Go ahead,” she says quietly, pulling on a tense shoulder as she draws closer behind him, still holding the edge of the knife precariously against his neck – any wrong moves and he could hurt himself, and truly having him under control is too gratifying to give up just yet. “Answer her.”

She feels the air go out of him as he exhales, a careful shrug of his throat as he swallows, and the vibrations of his voice through the metal in her hand as he speaks in the trader’s language – asking what she wants, presumably. His hands don’t move from his sides, though she watches the marked one from the corner of her eye – he could blink, or try to at least, and if this were real he might get away with a nasty cut instead of a fatal wound, though it’s not the point of the challenge she’s confident she’s just met. The trader calls back, sounding dissatisfied with his response, and there’s something intoxicating about having the power to keep him from going to her.

“What does she want?” she asks in the same muted whisper, adjusting the hand on his shoulder so her thumb shifts from the collar of his shirt to sit against alarmingly warm skin, probing for his pulse in the recesses of his neck.

“She can’t find the artichokes.” How he manages to make this sound so smooth is beyond her, and she definitely doesn’t believe her face was so close to the hollow between his neck and the polished flat of the knife when this started.

“How unfortunate,” she says practically into his ear, noticing for the first time distinctive scarring up the back of the cartilage that suggests he’d had it pierced once upon a time.

She could demand an admission that she’s chosen the right moment and passed the challenge, but realises they aren’t words she wants to force from his mouth, so instead lifts the knife away and steps back, raising her hands as he turns to face her like she’s playing at surrender.

“Daaau–ud!” comes the cry again, but he only whips his head around and barks a firm pairing of words at the woman that reek of an instruction to stay put. Then he turns and advances on Emily until the edge of the counter meets her hips – the point at which she registers she’s been backing away.

There’s a moment where he slips into being unreadable, blank expression like a mask he’s carved out of a single piece of stone, and in this context it’s far more intimidating than ever before. When he’s more recently lingering looks and fleeting smiles, a return to this blank slate is more worrying than she’d like to admit.

She has a moment of doubt, thinks maybe she’s angered him somehow – why she should care is more to the point – but the bolt of fear that shoots through her is as real as the wooden countertop that she grips with white knuckles, holding her breath for she doesn’t know what.

He lays a palm just outside each of hers on the edge of the counter, spreading out as he fits himself around her, and she’s wired enough that she pulls back when his face looms into hers. Nothing about him right now tells her instincts to do anything else, just that terrifying, knife-edge focus honing in on her.

“Now you’re getting it,” he declares like a teacher and boss rolled into one, then pulls up and has turned away by the time she lets out a breath just before bursting.
The spread that fills the table outside is truly astonishing by the time it’s finally served, a feast that would feed twice as many as they are, which Emily supposes makes for a preview of what they’ll be eating over the coming days.

*They*, she catches herself in dangerous familiarity, burning a gunpowder trail of guilt every time she accidentally refers to herself and Daud as any kind of unit, even if just in her thoughts; it comes off too close to the newlyweds that their guest seems unconvinced by his continuing dismissal of their being. Or perhaps just should be, in her horribly misinformed opinion.

The food is predictably excellent, and one thing the trader does not lack among her supplies is somewhat fortified red wine; not quite as strong as the port she’s had back home, but infused with the same distinctive spices that flavour the food she recognises as Pandyssian purely by being unknown to her. The trader even has *meat*, seasoned beef that softens over hours in that tajeen that she and only she was permitted to check on, though after several weeks without Emily finds herself unable to stomach as much of it as she anticipates.

It’s arguably one of the best meals she’s had in memory – not simply since she arrived here, but ever, something in the taste of sun-ripened food that came fresh out of the garden earlier this day, and hasn’t spent dark days in shipping containers or being grown under artificial conditions that’s incomparable with even the finest offerings of Dunwall. She makes a note to do further research on Pandyssian cuisine when she has resources that speak her language and don’t seem more concerned with drinking astonishing amounts of wine throughout a near-endless cycle of cigars.

Meanwhile, Daud is the most objectionably gracious of hosts, ensuring their newly replaced glasses are never empty for long and even explaining the more obscure dishes over her shoulder without needing to be asked in his dedication to the service of the women at his table. She considers idly that she should be lucky to have someone even half as diligent at her table back in Dunwall, but the thought provokes instant guilt, realising hospitality and service may not reside so closely in other people’s minds.

She renews her efforts to communicate with the other guest at the table as they settle into the meal, Daud seeming more amenable to translating now their business appears to be concluded. Over the evening she learns that the woman has been following the ‘old’ route for some half a century, as her parents did before her, but her children – six of them – have taken to ships or moved to the city, so after her no one will follow the trail. It seems strange to think this was once a causeway busy enough that a house like Daud’s would have been built and thrived, traders often stopping in to exchange goods and take shelter on the way into Karnaca; how they’re both the last of their kind.

“I realise I never asked her name,” she comments at one point, and the character of Daud’s gaze – he’s already looking at her, no question of that – shifts slightly.

“Call her Uhma,” he says in a soft, meant-for-her voice that shouldn’t feel as indulgent as it does.

“Why?” she asks, detecting that it’s not the answer she seeks as her brows knot closer together

“Means auntie, roughly speaking,” he offers. He changes when speaking the other language, she’s noticed – more expressive, gestures and emotion in his tone that she’s never seen in his parlance of the common tongue. As if he’s not quite the same person in this form of speech that predates his life of bloodshed, and the warped route it must have taken to leave him here.

“I should address her as an aunt?” she queries, turning her head to look at him more directly, engaging the negative space between them like flipping a switch. She tries to recall how many times he’s refilled her glass and finds it slips her mind.
“It’s usual,” he assures her. “A sign of respect.” Of course, this woman has no idea who she really is, and it’s peculiar to find herself on the other end of dues owed.

“What do you call her?”

He smirks before answering, “Sister.”

It sinks in like nothing else before has had any permeability on her, and might be the abundance of food and drink, or the look on Daud’s face as he casually highlights the generation between them, but she suddenly finds her head spinning.

“Excuse me,” she says over-formally, getting up and pacing into the darkness like she’s making for the bathroom, wondering far too late what she’s really doing here… outside of her training, at least.

As much as she can try and put it down to anything else, she has pushed this madness far more than he has. Even though the affection is his, he’s the one who’s been pulling back, telling her it’s ‘unwise’ and not initiating the activities that on reflection make her wonder what insanity this experience has led her to. Moreover, if she were to stop pushing, would that be the end of it?

She wanders in the darkness trying to unknot the writhing snake-pit of conflicts, because as entirely sensible as the proposition to just stop appears, it sticks like a bone in the back of her throat – perhaps because she’ll still know it’s there, and she can’t just let him admire her and do nothing, as if that’s a reasonable solution to this problem. Just as the mask of indifference had to be broken off his face, so too must the manacles he’s locked around his hands come away. He owes it to her, somehow, not to withhold any part of himself regardless of what she wants to do with it – him.

It’s only when she’s almost back at the terrace – dawdling far longer than she would have reasonably needed for a trip that didn’t host a self-contained existential crisis – that she notices the music coming from the lantern-lit table, dishes of food abandoned as someone plucks a stringed instrument rather poorly. She rounds the corner and is moderately surprised to see it’s Daud, having expected it to be the trader, who instead sits puffing on a cigar and humming throatily along to the melody he picks only passably out of a weathered instrument that sits more comfortably in his lap than the strings under his fingers. Dressed in another of those culturally fashionable shirts fresh off the trader’s cart, it pulls snug around his shoulders as he holds the small lute-ish looking thing, collar dipping low enough to frame the scarred contours and wiry hair of his chest like he’s one to talk about what is or isn’t distracting.

“I didn’t know you played,” she remarks, and as he glances up at her his hands still.

“Barely,” he replies gruffly, then with a sideward glance at his so-called sister adds, “but she insists.” The notion that the once Knife of Dunwall, terror of a city, could be cowed into playing tunes for an old woman ought to be terribly amusing, but somehow it leaves her cold.

“Well you’re flat,” she delivers frostily, and without knowing why it seems necessary to correct – except that she can correct it – walks up to him and holds out an expectant hand. He offers it up to her unquestionably, which is somehow even more torturous – that he just gives her what she wants, a few things excepting. She throws herself into classical training instead, two fingers on the corroded tuning knobs as she tweaks the strings experimentally, finding the sweet spots as she twists this one desperately controllable thing into harmony.

He refuses her when she offers it back. “Please,” he requests simply, and could have reached into her chest and pumped her heart with his hand by the way it reacts. “Relieve me.”

Of what? She thinks despairingly, but says nothing of it because he’s clearly utterly ignorant of the
turmoil in her head speaking to her like this incites, and sets herself down on the bench, fingerling her way through scales as she picks up the nuances of the instrument. It’s similar to things she’s been taught on – the proper skills of a high-born lady, as well as an Empress and anything else the kingdom needed before she could think of being herself – then launches into a practice piece she’s known since she was a child, adjusting to the different shape and feel of the smaller, more compact instrument that has been thrust upon her.

Officially ‘relieved’ of the burden of entertainment, she watches Daud light a cigar like the woman’s, leaning back against the table and puffing a blueish haze around his head as he sips his drink like he’s finally off-duty for the night. She considers that she might have put her foot in it on reaching the end of the piece, because the woman sits up and speaks enthusiastically to their translator, who plucks the half-smoked roll from between his lips to offer his services.

“She’s impressed,” he remarks with a fresh layer of grit in his voice and smoke billowing between his lips, “but wonders if you know any sea shanties.” Of course, the classical pieces that impress at court have little currency with this audience, she realises, and starts turning over scores of useless pieces of fancy that will have no recognition here before thinking instead of the more absurd ditties she’s picked up purely for laughs – things that she’d never use in polite company.

“She may be in luck,” she remarks enigmatically before launching into a tune that accompanies a series of decidedly filthy verses about a seaborne woman from Morley – luckily she’s had the required quantity of alcohol to unlock it from her memory – and recognition blossoms in her audience’s face.

She holds her tongue from rhyming stanzas about the adventures and fate of the oxymoronically dubbed ‘maiden’ with a part of her anatomy ‘so wide you could wade’in’ – though suspects Daud at least is familiar with the common-tongue lyrics, going by the dirty grin that sits in one corner of his mouth as the other drags on his cigar. She can’t work out which piece of her repertoire has amused him more, though the subtle tapping of a foot along with the bouncing chords of this one is innately more rewarding than the vaguely cynical tint to his acknowledgement of her more refined skills.

There’s a new graze of fast-returned stubble across his jaw that shines in the lamplight, silver hairs catching in the light to match the shocks flowing back from his temples where his hairline reaches like it’s grasping for the roots of such aged plumage. She catches herself in the middle of it again – responding to him wrong, letting herself get lost in the intricacies of his expression through curling plumes of smoke. Even if she had wanted him to admit being attracted to her – if she had at all, but for the sake of the analysis even if she had – it wasn’t supposed to be for this.

She reaches the end of the shanty and sets the instrument aside, but in spite of the enthusiastic patter that comes from the woman Daud clocks that she’s not preparing for an encore, so doesn’t bother translating further requests, just sits up slightly as he takes the cigar in his first two fingers and lowers his hand to the table, watching her as he always does. It drives a flush up her neck as she feels wine tinted blood rushing through her veins, vividly recalling the sensation of her tongue touching his like it was some kind of a game and not a thing to do with a person who’d smashed her world to pieces half a lifetime ago. She grasps all of a sudden why he’s been so volatile about the snatches of affection she’s thrown at him like handfuls of sand in a fist-fight – who does that? No wonder he’d reacted badly.

“I think I shall retire for the night,” she delivers in perfect false epithets, nothing to fool him, but at least he’s got another source of company tonight and hopefully won’t contest her insincerity. She gets up, ignoring what she’s certain is a disparaging line of questioning about what on earth she thinks she’s doing leaving so early in the evening from the woman, and heads urgently for the
door. Except he reaches out to catch her arm in gentle fingers as she passes like it’s the most natural thing in the world, and she stops like he’s run a whaling hook through her.

“You all right?” he asks simply, tilting his head to one side to glance up at her with nothing but the most uncontaminated sincerity in his face, smoking cigar stub clenched between two knuckles on the table in his other hand. His troubles with her had been not meaning what she said or did, yet her problem seems to be the exact opposite – he truly seems to care, and it’s intolerable.

“Fine,” she answers tightly. “Simply… tired.” It’s a lie, especially as she’s napped through most of the afternoon, but she needs to get away from him before her half-drunk self forgets who he is and falls back into thinking about how and why he makes her heart race – or what could be done to make it beat even faster.

He releases her in the merest physical sense of the word, then offers a couple of his own, “Then goodnight.”

“Goodnigh-” she returns in a rushed echo as she bolts like horse.

Chapter End Notes

The last line of this is a reference to 'Peach, Plum, Pear' by Joanna Newsom, another classic on my playlist of inspiration songs for these two. However this chapter has gotta go out to Laura from the last chapter whose song rec 'Nothing's gonna hurt you baby' by Cigarettes After Sex on loop got me through the final stages of editing this sizable update, which, and I know I say this a lot... is a favourite chapter. Also shoutout to thegrumblinggirl who listens to me ramble about trashy headcanons and is therefore the best/worst kind of enabler.

I will also DIE for the line about cutting out potato eyes 'like the way he looks at her with his is nothing to be mentioned' and am not kidding at all. END ME FOR THAT LINE.

I did an excessive amount of research of sailor's songs and limericks specifically for the purpose of writing that one joke about the 'Maiden of Morley' and regret none of it. I'd also planned for a scene involving Daud and Emily + musical instruments for the *longest* time, so it's good to finally get it out there. Definitely talked to someone about it on tumblr at some point, so if that was you (astarrysky I think) then here's that scene FINALLY.

P.s. don't kinkshame me for my old man/foreign-language speaking fetishes. I'm already garbage so there's no point in holding back.
The Thirty-Fourth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily pays too much attention to things Daud is seemingly in ignorance of; namely, himself.

Chapter Notes

Early update as I am soon to be on a variety of planes and then back home in the UK for a time, so I figured better to kill the travel time sorting this one out now rather than clawing time when I'm fresh off the boat (3 planes) on Friday.

Every week I seem to astonish myself by finding what's in the chapter enjoyable, I must have some kind of goldfish brain for writing... either way, enjoy the chapter, I sure as heck do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emily sleeps fitfully, dreaming her mother’s death a thousand times over and trying each time to rewrite the sequence of events and stop the inevitable from happening, like resetting pieces in a music box. As if she can alter the past by fixing whatever thing it is they’ve all been missing and stop Daud from making such a catastrophic mistake, then at least the things between them would be–

She wakes up with the makings of a wine headache and a sense that she left just in time last night, narrowly escaping what could have been a very enjoyable evening in the company of a man she’s meant to be dedicated to learning from or defeating in combat and nothing else. A goal that she renews in her mind as she dresses and heads downstairs, expecting half a pot of warm coffee and an empty kitchen in which to gather her thoughts. She gets neither.

While Daud is nowhere to be seen, the trader has noisily commandeered the space and Emily enters to the sound of crackling oil and an extensive greeting that she still doesn’t understand a lick of. The woman presides over the stove with a frying pan in one hand and cigar in the other, speaking to Emily at length as if she’s expected to know what any of it means. It’s far too early in the day for such trials, but she spies the coffee pot steaming at the back of the stove, so with a put-on smile and indicative gestures manages to convey her desire in a way that may well be mistaken as an offer for help.

The woman thereafter shenanigans her Empress into taking a tray from one of the shelves and setting to the task of filling it with what appears to be their breakfast. There’s fresh bread on the counter that differs to the normal loaf – a different baker, perhaps – and a rare treat in the jug of milk that’s presumably straight from the cows outside, which she sets out along with the rest of the fixings, including – thankfully – the coffee pot. She manages to get away from the woman with only a small dish of refried vegetables and stack of more time-of-day-appropriate biscuits before anything else can be added to her load, and heads onto the terrace primarily to get away from
further haranguing, only to come across Daud fast asleep in the hammock.

He’s one leg hanging over the side and mouth slightly open, the source of a distinct snore that the bluster inside had disguised. In spite of the noise he seems quite blissfully at rest, untroubled by the alcohol-induced turmoil that kept her tossing in her over-warm room all night, trying desperately to rewrite a history that was long since dead and buried. She almost begrudges disturbing him – almost, as with careful balance due to her hands being otherwise occupied raises a foot to gently push against the tanned shin crooked over the edge of the hammock.

He sways a while before opening his eyes, lifting slowly like unoiled shutters and with more than a little confusion. She’s not close enough to be in danger should his reactions take a bloodthirsty turn, but it doesn’t appear to be the case, because he comes to more befuddled than anything.

“Sleep well?” she remarks wryly, but is totally unprepared for the guttural noise he makes in response, issuing raggedly from even his shredded throat like he’s forgotten the common tongue overnight. He rubs his face with a weathered hand, making a noise like sandpaper over his stubble in a way that’s surely not supposed to draw as much attention as it does, and she can smell the smoke soaked into him from a full pace away.

“S’at coffee?” he croaks as much as speaks, fingers splayed over his brow like he’s having trouble keeping his eyes open.

“Ah… yes,” she answers, as restless in her own skin as he is restful in his sling, but for reasons best put down to her need to be absolute in her conclusions, finds herself asking, “Were you out here all night?”

“Hm,” he grunts, sliding his other leg to hang over the edge and hauling himself up like an undertaker propping up a corpse, a hand shielding his eyes from the sun like it offends him. As much as she’s resolved to focus on the task of mastering and beating him at his own game, she can’t help but pity anyone in such an obvious state of disarray.

Something about this disrupts the flow of clever quips she tries thinking of, and none end up making it to completion on her tongue, resulting in the next thing she says being an ungainly inquiry amounting to the word, “Milk?”

He makes another throaty sound that she interprets as a yes, so balancing the tray on one hand she pours a cup, sugared as he takes it, and hands the mug over before retreating to the table to fix one for herself.

They drink in starkly uncomfortable silence, the source of which only becomes apparent when he give a pensive murmur of, “I don’t usually drink like that,” and she realises what she’s observing is in fact Daud, hungover.

There’s no point even trying to contain the smile it brings to her mouth; she’d left him and the trader fairly late into the evening, but had heard the echo of their conversation as she drifted in and out of sleep to the point of losing track of whether the incompressible rasp was part of her dreams or the real world. It’d turned into a proverbial night on the tiles for him, apparently.

“That accounts for the hammock,” she comments, screwing down her restraint like a shipping line to stop herself outright laughing, but foolishly allows herself add, “I must have left at the right time, if you couldn’t make it the length of the house.”

Though it would’ve been a sight, she notes with some lingering regret that’s fully overwhelmed by the prospect of what could’ve happened if she hadn’t left. She doesn’t know what he’s like after
too many glasses of wine, but it’s not his behaviour that worries her most in the realm of drunken misjudgements: she can cover that more than well enough herself, especially where red wine is concerned.

“That’s not it,” he mutters, peering at her out of harrowed eyes with a purple tinge to the bags hanging under them just over the edge of his cup.

“No?” she replies archly, sipping her pleasingly milky coffee as noises from inside the kitchen continue with unrelenting energy; no such signs of fatigue from the company that’d run him into the ground last night. “Then what was the cause, pray tell?” She almost tells him she wishes she’d known his bed was empty given the wretched night she had in hers, but doesn’t for reasons that don’t need delving into.

“Nostalgia,” he reveals remorsefully, straightening up and rolling one of his shoulders like the unconventional sleeping arrangements have taken a toll on his frame – sturdy, but not exactly a new model.

“Nostalgia?” she echoes curiously. “For what?”

“The past,” he replies shortly, the spring of answers drying up to a trickle.

“Which has… something to do with hammocks?” she prompts with a farcical twist of her eyebrows.

“Spent ‘lotta time on ships when I was young,” he delivers bluntly, spitting each word like pips he’d rather not swallow.

Of course, she thinks, pulling the pieces together like scraps of patchwork; references to the Pandysian isles, a mother’s tongue in an obscure language of merchants and sailors – whatever ‘young’ means to him. It all points to the life before he became a bloodletter for her city, long before she was even born. Even more than awkward considerations of the thirty-odd years that set them apart, it strikes her that there’s still so much she doesn’t know about him, and wonders if anyone does. He’s clearly indisposed to telling.

The trader comes outside and makes a tremendous fuss of Emily taking several biscuits with her coffee before moving onto Daud, who entreats her with a long groan and refuses anything except the mug gripped in knuckles spotted with scars; hands of a man who’d been in plenty of punch-ups before he learned how to use a knife instead.

When the woman tries the coffee pot and discovers it empty Emily feels uncharacteristically guilty, bolting to her feet with an apology on her lips like it’s her fault it only makes a couple of cups and they’re – perhaps for the first time since Daud arrived here – three. Then again, the trader brewed it, and it’s Daud’s coffee, pot and house for that matter.

“I didn’t think- tell her I’ll make another,” she rushes to him, sparing only a thought for the intent of the look he gives her before offering a few sparse words to the woman, by which point she’s already got the percolator in hand and is pacing back into the kitchen to set things to rights. She’s cleaned it out and is scooping fresh grounds into the chamber when she realises she left her cup outside – she doesn’t begrudge making a new batch, but doing so without her own to drink in the meantime is a comfort she’s not willing to spare.

Heading back out to retrieve it, she sees Daud has put his feet back up and is laying in the hammock with his eyes closed, cup balanced loosely between his hands on the flat of his stomach. Pausing with her fingers on the handle of her own, she only notices the trader is still there – but
unusually quiet – when their eyes meet after hers finally break away from him.

“Auuuuwh,” she crows tellingly, grin a wide mile displaying a few missing teeth.

Emily’s rather glad that she doesn’t understand whatever she says next; it saves her the denial as she quickly turns away, spilling a slosh of her coffee with the sharpness of the angle that she whips around with before rushing back inside.

When Emily next steps onto the terrace Daud has vanished from the hammock, though not quite without a trace – she saw him pacing in the direction of the washing area through the window as she brewed a new pot of coffee some time ago. She goes back outside to split the fresh one with the trader, taking advantage of the language barrier for once in her deliberate and sometimes put-on ignorance of anything the woman tries to say with gestures in his direction.

Thereafter she willingly allows herself to get swept along in the bustle of either cleaning up after breakfast or preparing for lunch – perhaps both – and is set to various tasks with instructions that she takes largely from mime rather than an improved understanding of the language. This includes being sent outside carrying a bowl of scraps that she’s not at all clear on what she’s supposed to do with, and is the condition in which she crosses paths with Daud on his way back from the shower.

It’s perfectly sensible, with rational consideration of the facts, that having slept all night – drunk – in the same clothes, he wouldn’t necessarily put everything back on after washing the wine sweat and stench of cigars off him. However, rational is not the tone of her reaction as she turns expectantly in the direction of his footsteps and catches him strolling along the path up to the house with his stylishly tailored shirt tossed over one shoulder and not – as would be otherwise afforded by the clothing were he actually to be wearing it – covering his body.

She has to remind herself that this is not by any stretch of the word the first time she has seen him without a shirt on, or even much less than that. Not to mention the newly healing scar that stands fresh against all the aged marks cut into his torso; marks that she’d put in him as a stark reminder of the indifference with which she’d once handled his bare chest like a sock to be darned. Not so now, where she slows in her own path across the patio and considers whether it would be more conspicuous to look away or keep staring, falling by default into the latter and cajoling herself quite definitely too late to take her gaze upward to his face, where his eyes are already on her.

“Hungry?” he says in too easy a manner, eyeing the bowl of vegetable peelings and unpalatable leftovers in her hands. Teasing her is hardly unprecedented, but she finds herself stuck between thoughts and unable to come up with an inventive riposte.

“I don’t really know what she’s expecting me to do with this,” she answers lamely. His breathy not-quite chuckle is indicitive of better spirits than she has ever been known to possess on a hangover, and he advances another couple of steps take it from her pliable hands.

“Here,” he hums as much as he says, crossing to the very end of the patio and starting to bash the carved wooden bowl against one of the pillars of the trellis.

When he starts making an unusual hollering noise that echoes across the grounds she considers if he might have lost his mind, only for the clank of bells to foretell the curious approach of one of the cows, tentatively probing the bowl he offers with its nose before seeming convinced enough to start eating from it. She follows brimming with curiosity, creeping shyly to his side.
“I thought they weren’t friendly,” she comments – they’ve certainly fled from her should she get even remotely close – and perhaps just to disprove her he stretches out a hand to rub across the cattle’s long face.

“Just wary of strangers,” he replies gently, and without invitation pushes the bowl into her grip, awkwardly taking it as the creature’s large tongue scoops the scraps from the dish with surprising force.

*Like everyone else here,* she thinks, extending her other hand inch by careful inch to brush her fingertips against the animal’s forehead, at which point it pulls back suspiciously, and with the food supply exhausted trots off.

She gathers and releases a breath as she takes in the perfection of the landscape stretched out before them, like something out of a painting she’s seen hung in galleries and for the first time appreciates the natural beauty that inspires such work. She toys with the idea of what if there was no going back – if this was the end of a journey – and recalls what he’d called it the first time she asked, as ignorant as she’d been. Turning her head a fraction to the side, she watches Daud gazing out at the same view through wizened eyes, and wonders if he’s basking in the unrelenting *peace and quiet* as well.

“They’re eating all my blackberries,” he announces thoughtfully, shattering any false poeticism she must have been projecting onto him.

Unable to contain herself, she breaks up into laughter that soon becomes uncontrollable – not just at the line, but the whole absurd situation; including her more absurd-yet awkwardness around him. As if she isn’t who she is, capable of standing by all her actions in spite of – perhaps even especially because of – how foolish they might be.

She doesn’t get to be reckless and ill-advised very often, and with Daud more than anyone else, she reasons, it shouldn’t matter how she chooses to deal with him; because if this place is past the end of the civilised world, and if he truly can’t get to her – not even like *this* – then she surely has nothing left to fear.

“Come along then,” she announces like a breath of fresh air as the hysteria settles, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with an inarguably shirtless man giving her an undeniably bemused look as they watch over the rolling expanse of his lands, punctuated with the cream interludes of grazing cattle.

“Hm?” he inquires with an intrigued tilt of his head, catching her in the creased corner of an eye under the shadow of his brutally characteristic scar.

“I’m ready for my next lesson,” she replies obviously. “Though, perhaps you want to finish getting dressed first?” He gives her an almost shocked look, perhaps surprised that she should comment on his state of undress like she’s supposed to be ignorant of it.

“No need,” he replies firmly, folding his arms across his chest like that helps define anything except the entirely preoccupying shapes of his torso. “I can brief you now.”

“So help me I shouldn’t have offered,” she despairs, realising that she need only *breathe* word of a lesson before he’ll pounce on the opportunity to lecture her senseless.

“You’ve shown me you can pull it off once, but the right moment doesn’t always land in your lap,” he continues with an awful lot of business for a half-dressed man. They’re hardly the words that she’d use for her efforts, but then it wouldn’t be *him* if he didn’t undervalue the larger part of her
achievements. “Now’s a good time to start learning how to make it happen without being caught,” he drawls.

“Caught?” she queries, and he casts a throwaway glance at the house, nodding towards the kitchen and its still-audible inhabitant – singing, it would appear. “By her? Then surely I’ve already passed.”

He turns inch by inch to face her, arms still crossed in a way that does him all the same favours as the pose would for anyone else with his build, practically drawing a line underneath a chest dusted with hair that’s intermittently greying, the odd accent of dark mixed in with silver.

“Right,” he confirms obstinately, as she rivets her eyes guiltily back up to his. “So do it again.”

“That’s it?” she scathes.

“One difference,” he replies as immovably as a mountain, but then in the time it takes her to blink – specifically as she blinks, she realises – he vanishes and rematerialises behind her.

It’s been a while since he called on his gifts from the Outsider to outmanoeuvre her, and it comes as a bit of a surprise. The physical as well as emotional reaction of having him suddenly a whisker behind her – shirtless – hits her entire body, but rather than respond with all of hers she just whips her head in line with her shoulder, straining to look at him over it as he quietly informs her, “I’ll be trying to do the same thing.”

Foolish as it is, Emily closes her eyes and takes a deep, give-me-strength heave of breath as Daud walks unceremoniously away – she hopes to put on a shirt.

Chapter End Notes

The entire first scene of this is one of my favourite things ever; from hungover, non-verbal Daud to the trader catching Emily *looking* at him, I just can't any of it. Special shoutout to thegrumbling girl for the special Hands(tm) moment in that scene too... just, important hand things yanno.

Oh also this update ft. special guest COW, because obviously it's paramount to the slow burn of this romance for them to feed a dumb milky cream face cow with its big stupid round eyes and a wet nose and pet it on its aforementioned dumb face. If you can't see that then I don't know what to tell you, honestly. I also had to research if cows ate blackberries for that line (they do) and it gives me a really crazy amount of joy as this is: moment-ruining, the fanfic.

Also DAUD would you PUT ON A SHIRT godDAMIT said basically no one.
Chapter Summary

Emily resolves not to underestimate Daud, and still somehow comes up short.

Chapter Notes

Another earlyish update (I'm in a new timezone so unsure how it matches up with my usual schedule) as I am off for a week to beautiful Sicily! Plenty food for inspiration there.

This chapter definitely goes out to everyone who has been enjoying the meddlesome ways of our gal the Trader, who clearly knows what the what is up with these two :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emily returns to her room after waiting just long enough not to be on Daud’s heels as he heads to his own, and for the first time in weeks deliberately arms herself. Nothing in the way he spoke to her makes her think she should be anything less than life-and-death serious about this, and she’s not being made a fool of for underestimating him… anymore.

She can’t be visibly armed around their company and must restrict herself to what she can conceal, so slides a sheathed dagger into her waistband. Fitting into the groove of her hip, the handle presses into her belly and would be more comfortable behind her, but she can get at it quicker this way – speed matters with an opponent like hers. Swords are far too obvious, but a promising idea emerges so although she doesn’t load it, she carefully stashes a lone sleep dart about her person.

For reasons of pure practicality the best way to do this is carefully trapping in the fitted clutch of the underclothes that support her chest, securing the dart in what could otherwise be described as her cleavage. Concealed by her shirt collar, if Daud is looking there it may stand to reason he might not be so focused on hidden weapons. She allows herself a grin and gives her chest a perhaps more aesthetic than practical adjustment before escaping the dreaded heat of her room and returning downstairs.

The trader, now that Emily actually has to keep track of her, seems possessed of an unusual ability to be in several places at once, to say nothing of Daud, whom she’s certain is making use of his gifts from the Outsider as he jumps around the grounds like a spectre, making sure he’s never far from the trader if he’s anywhere near the house at all.

While the last thing she’d have considered was that ‘do it again’ could be such a tough challenge, it’s frustrating to realise how much he’s still holding back on her, making her think time and again she’s dealing with his full arsenal only to find there’s yet another layer underneath.
The whole household is on a later schedule than usual, so it’s mid-afternoon before the expansive lunch the woman has been overseeing is served, by which point there still hasn’t been a single window of opportunity to strike. Emily has been called on for assistance in the preparations far more than Daud, who busies himself about the grounds and it appears to be understood should be left to those devices and not troubled over this meal. Perhaps after the one he provided last night, or perhaps just because of his recalcitrance to be particularly useful to anyone in no small part due to a lingering hangover.

They finally sit down to lunch, an affair that includes a non-negotiable glass of wine which Daud nurses pathetically, and spends much of the meal with his face slumped against a hand, responding minimally to the trader’s conversation and hard-pressed to offer translation services of any kind. Emily manages to communicate with the woman anyway, developing a lingua franca based on expression, tone and gesture that serves well enough in lieu of any real comprehension of what one another is saying.

The woman makes some disparaging comment with a whip of her eyes at Daud, grinning toothily and raising her glass before taking a hearty glug. Emily returns the smile and matches the gesture with her own polite sip, not missing what might be a resentfully petty glare eking out from under his brow. He makes a surly, perhaps even petulant movement, thumbing the cutlery before serving himself some refried beans, but something in the action strikes a chord with her like vibrations along spider’s silk. It’s a while before she notices a knife missing from the table, which she would know because she laid it, but finds opportunities to needle him with suspicious looks tragically lacking.

Then he reaches for something on the far side of the spread of dishes that make up their lunch and clumsily knocks a fork onto the floor next to the woman; no sooner has the trader clucked at him and twisted around at the bench – a place along from Emily, closest to the kitchen – than she’s saddled with an urgent need to lean back from the table, as the lightly serrated edge of the table knife passes a hair away from her face as if blown on the wind.

She takes a surprised gasp and meets his eyes to see the grogginess gone, nothing but hardened, killer instinct to be found in there. However, she’s no chance to retaliate before the trader has righted herself again, and as quickly as he lashes out the flash of silver is gone, like he’s folded it into his hand and simply absorbed it. His drawn-out posture across the table becomes a reach to pick up some dish he pretends to want. The trader is none the wiser, of course, and it’s only after such a hands-on demonstration that Emily really grasps what he means for her to do.

The refilling of her cup gives her an idea, so she raises her glass with a broad smile before putting it to her lips and half-draining it with a few ambitious gulps. Daud’s scathing looks are accompanied by what sounds rather like a warm endorsement from the woman, who raises the carafe to top her up, but there’s an intrigued twist to his brow that makes her wonder if he might suspect what she’s trying to do.

Her goal is achieved some half an hour or so later, when she empties the pitcher with some assistance from the trader and absolutely none whatsoever from Daud. After discovering this unacceptable scenario, the woman gets insistently to her feet and goes away to procure a refill.

There’s no words to foretell what comes next, but Emily’s ready for it this time, whipping the dagger from her waistband and deflecting the flash of Daud’s tableware as he swings for her across the table. She spares no time in retaliating, lurching forward with a hand landing clumsily between dishes on the table as she drives the point of her dagger square at his face.

He stops her thrust just short of adding a new tributary to the scars of his cheek, catching her
weapon by the hilt with the edge of his own knife, then forcefully slamming both onto the table, partially upsetting a plate of tomatoes. It is around this point she considers that drinking a not inconsiderable amount of wine as part of this plan may be catching up with her, because aside from the instincts screaming within her to fight tooth and nail to ensure that he can’t be allowed to beat her, there is another notable impulse to grab him by the collar with her other hand and pull him across the table for something else entirely.

She writes it off to the wine in the hurried moments before she whips her weapon back and clashes with him again, neither of them getting up but managing to carry out half a duel across the tabletop in the time that it takes the trader to refill a jug of wine. The sound footsteps warn of the incoming need to conclude the bout, but she’s hardly going to stop without at least trying to win and throws out a last reckless blow, only to find Daud’s point of attack has suddenly changed – no longer aiming for her vitals but her hand.

With expert precision he feeds the table knife between her hand and the handle of her dagger, flicking it up and out of her grasp like tossing a hot cake. Her weapon flies up into the creeping-flower canopy of the trellis and gets tangled in the vines, remaining there as the trader comes back to the table. Daud’s own blade has vanished and he sits churlishly posed as before, though she likes to imagine the hand he props across his face shields his mouth over whatever smug grin he’s bearing about the fool he’s made of her yet again.

The temptation to look directly upwards is monumental, so it’s only with great effort that she restricts herself to fleeting glances at the precarious way her dagger hangs from the roof of the trellis as the lunch continues, dramatically moderating the speed with which she drinks as the numerous glasses she’s already had continue to arrive in an orderly procession to her head.

It’s reached the point, in fact, that when the trader pulls out one of the characteristic cigars that she and Daud have been smoking – offering one to him that he gives only brief consideration before declining – she finds herself asking, “May I try one?” with an indicative gesture that conveys far more than her words do. The woman cracks a terribly approving smile as she offers it out, and not even Emily is swift enough to dodge the cutting looks that Daud flings her way as she takes it.

“Didn’t know you smoked,” he comments in the way people so loved to do; like it’s not regal enough.

“Sometimes,” she replies cryptically, rolling the fat-for-a-cigarette, slim-for-a-cigar between her fingertips and then just to keep him piqued adds, “I typically prefer a hookah.”

“Hm,” he rumbles, unreadable like maybe he can’t decide what he makes of it – good, she thinks out of spite – and then advises, “Don’t inhale at first,” like she needs a lesson in smoking too. She gives an exasperated huff more for aesthetic purposes than anything else, leaning over as the woman offers her a light and not taking his advice to heart, lets half a lungful of assaultingly strong smoke hit her chest before she starts coughing like a plague victim.

“Don’t you... dare laugh,” she hacks, though no such threats work on the trader, who naturally finds such a spectacle hilarious even as she offers her a glass of something to wash the coughing fit down with – wine of course, never water – and manages to settle it somewhat.

She keeps the cigar clasped between her fingers, waiting for her breath to catch up with her before taking a far more modest pull, countering every instinct not to inhale as she fills her mouth with the fragrant smoke, then letting it out on carefully controlled breath. Whether it’s the wine, coughing fit or cigar, she’s not taken more than another drag before her head starts spinning so much she has to shut her eyes.
“You still with us?” Daud remarks in a way that might be teasing, but she rises above such commentary and without looking simply takes another puff on the cigar.

“Just about,” she offers vaguely, opening her eyes to half-mast just to flick them lazily up to the trellis where her dagger is still stuck up in those damned vines, lingering on his for a moment before letting them slide shut again. “My night was not particularly restful.” And she’s semi-drunk at lunch.

The trader’s patter has become a background noise, something she can tune in and out of, but Daud’s rough tones cannot be ignored – though not for lack of trying.

“She says you should take a nap,” he translates by no invitation of Emily’s, and she peeks out from under half-raised eyes at him as she blows out a puff of smoke.

“A capital idea,” she remarks sarcastically, before setting in to break up the notion like driftwood. “But in my room, with this heat?”

She checks the dagger – still poised midway between them and not going anywhere of its own volition – then sets her mind back to the contemplation of how she’s going to retrieve it, letting the foreign-language chatter fade out again. At least she attempts to, before the increasingly strident entreaties that the woman makes of Daud along with his equally forceful rebuttals call on her attention yet again.

“She says,” he begins begrudgingly, like someone’s twisting his arm even though no such hands are laid on him, “… you should use mine.”

“Does she now?” she replies, sucking a mouthful of smoke to blow out the other side of her mouth; starting to get the hang of it, she hopes. “And what do you say?” He gives her a stern look that seems somewhat undercut by the impression her smoking has on him, and puts special effort into appearing sultry as she takes another drag.

“You know where it is,” he murmurs thickly as she breathes out a carefully controlled cloud. She didn’t expect that for an answer, though there’s still the small matter of her dagger, which she’s not planning to leave stuck in the trellis over her head like she’s supposed to walk around mostly unarmed in the vicinity of this man, not to mention half a cigar to finish.

“Noted,” is all she says in response to the offer, and doesn’t move a muscle as the stalemate continues.

In the end the critical intervention comes from him, when he gets up to ostensibly start clearing the table and knocks his shoulder against one of the pillars of the trellis hard enough to shake the whole structure. With the end of a cigar still glowing in the corner of her vision as she inhales, Emily catches the sliver of moving light and rustle as her blade slides from the precarious stability it’d achieved.

Acting before she even knows what she’s doing, she pulls a reckless gasp of the acrid smoke into her chest and flicks the stub across the table, spewing a dense cloud that’s followed with the coughing fit she knew it’d induce. As she hacks she somehow manages to snatch the knife out of the clouded air before it falls to the table, and before Daud, more importantly, whose hand swipes a mere whisker after hers. The blade was very slightly closer to her side, and he may also – she’d like to think – have been taken in by her diversion.

She flips the dagger alongside her forearm the way he’s been doing, keeping it from the trader’s
sight while putting her other hand to her mouth and coughing until her head throbs, drawing her armed hand to her stomach in a convenient ruse to allow her to slip it back into its sheath while the trader thumps her on the back with surprising strength, seeming none the wiser.

“I may take you up on that offer now,” she announces hoarsely, getting up from the table and finding her legs far weaker than anticipated, recalling how much wine she’d consumed for the sake of this damn challenge – and for what, losing a dagger that she’s only just gotten back?

“Then I’ll see you in,” he declares unexpectedly, getting up and setting plates along a forearm in a way that’d make him chronically vulnerable – or prepared to break every single one of them, if that’s what had to happen. She’s no doubt he would if not for the trader, practically taunting her with the inability to take advantage of him while her sinuous patter continues unabated. Emily doesn’t know what to make of any of his offers, but smiles a parting courtesy to the woman and weaves inside with the shadow of him behind her and knowledge that there’s no way the floor can actually be bouncy.

She hears Daud putting down plates on the kitchen table behind her, followed by further chatter as the trader joins in the cleanup, bustling in on both their heels with a cigar and glass of wine still clasped expertly in a single hand. Emily keeps on walking the straight shot to his room with the notion that if he’s looking to get to her then he can absolutely follow her into the hallway and put himself outside the woman’s protective oversight.

The satisfaction she gains from ambling straight past the stairs without stopping is almost immeasurable, but having got far enough from the kitchen to lose sight of the trader she also can’t pass on the opportunity to turn on Daud in such confined space.

Her attempt to cage him against the wall – as she’s done successfully before, weeks ago when she was still blindly fumbling for the root of his static aversion to her – backfires spectacularly as she realises yet again how much he’d been holding back. She’s barely moved with intention before his hands are on her shoulders, the burgeoning force she’d called upon to push him in the direction of the wall completely swallowed by his as he shoves her into the opposite one.

On other occasions, when she isn’t imbued with enough wine to be minded to thinking there’s nothing disagreeable about being pushed against a wall by a man equal parts dangerous and inviting, like a freshly sharpened knife that can draw blood with the slightest wrong handling, she might have immediately fought back and actually tried to do something about him pressing her unequivocally against the plaster.

What she does is nothing, fixated instead on the shadowy turn to his expression that leaves her guessing whether he’s angry or something else. When one of his hands leaves her shoulder and drops to her waist, reaching under the bottom of her shirt as easily as if she’s the fabled bride waiting to be claimed, she falls alarmingly in favour of the latter.

In the heat of the moment she overlooks that there’s more than just herself under her shirt today, because his fingers close around the dagger slid into her waistband and pull it carefully free, coasting cleanly out of the sheath trapped in the hollow of her hip.

“I’ll be taking that,” he murmurs in a scratchy drawl, and she wrestles with herself over what she thought he was going to do – and exactly how much she still wants him to do it.
It's the wine, insists to herself as she bites back the urge to snatch her knife and a kiss, though not necessarily in that order. He steps back and the pressure lifts, leaving her almost gasping as she allows him to unarm her and just walk away.

She practically storms into his room, shoving the door rudely open and half-throwing it shut behind her, bouncing back off its fixings. It remains ajar as she collects herself as much as anyone could while fighting themselves out of a cloying shirt, pulling a concealed sleep-dart from their bra, and throwing themselves face down in the bed of a person she’s consciously reminding herself of all the ways he’s laid hands on her as reminders of how she can die, and not – as is much harder to stop herself thinking of – the way her addled mind tells her she wants him to now.

Chapter End Notes

I wasn't going to miss out on smoking! Emily too! I see that hookah in her den in DH2, I know what's up with our gal... she was just waiting for an opportunity.

Poor day-drunk Ems getting worked up by an obliviously chill (ft. grouchy! hungover) Daud who couldn't consider for a MOMENT that he might be the slightest bit appealing to anyone and is just going about his *business*, y'all.

Special general shoutout this week to everyone who's used my passive-aggressive tag with my tumblr on it to look me up and share their thoughts via it, I've gotten no hate whatsoever in fact!! In case anyone else has wondered about it I am 100% open to random messages, asks and rambling about anything Dishonored on my tumblr (especially this fic and Daud) and will absolutely reply (if not almost right away then when I get a chance) and it's a totally acceptable way to hear thoughts and commentary on this story that people may not want to leave in comments or have an account etc.

I'm friendly, basically!! Weird, obsessed with this pairing and being a professional trash person, but ultimately harmless.
Emily wakes up disorientated, to say the least. While she recalls the sequence of events that led to her current circumstances, at no point did she question any of them hard enough not to fling herself onto Daud’s bed and fall fast asleep. Especially not thinking about ways the scene in the hallway could have gone differently that she can hardly recall now without blood rushing to her face.

Fortunately, she’s slept off the most dangerous portion of the wine, but being in his bed certainly hasn’t help the inclinations it provoked – such as wondering how it can be so much more comfortable than the mattress she’s been thrashing on for almost three weeks, or how the bedding can smell quite undeniably good – and raises herself up trying to think of anything except the implications of what any of that could mean.

She thankfully finds ample distraction in casting her eyes around his room freely for the first time; the only other occasion she’d been in here she was half-blind from sunstroke or it was dark, so she’s had little chance to examine his personal quarters. No such troubles now, as she gets up feeling a little groggy and sorry for herself, but otherwise coherent as she sweeps a keen eye across the room.

It has the kind of furnishings to be expected, including a desk and high-backed writing chair, along with an armchair that sits lower to the ground nearby a low table and settling on she remembers finding him asleep in the only other time she was here. More remarkable are the shelves that stretch along the back wall the desk sits against, uninterrupted bar spaces for the shuttered windows. They’re simply constructed, bespoke to the volumes that fit neatly along them shelf after shelf, but impressive in the fact that the entire length of the wall is filled ceiling to floor with books, comprising a sizable library.
Puzzling how he could amass such a collection, she crosses the room until the stacks tower over her and reaches for one, unmarked except for a few numbers that are presumably dates. Pulling it out, she finds it a more delicate construction than she imagined and clearly handmade, so handles it a little more carefully as she turns the volume around in her hands and spreads the pages. Inside, as she suspected, are evenly spaced lines of slanted handwriting. It isn’t easy to make out the script at first, but she eventually finds her place in the cursive and begins to read;

Clans, 16

Arch-Duke Montecristo, having secured his title with five-month bloodbath that filled my coffers to bursting, is bought out for a gambling debt by an ordinary gambler by the name of Tobias Elm. My bill was significantly lower than his, and with the branches of the family piled up outside their tomb like logs the debtor hopes none will come to claim the small fortune owed to the Montecristo gambling house, who any clever card player will tell is more crooked than a coin of 7.

The Arch-Duke is a foully suspicious man who rarely leaves his office, a paranoia that extended to the mistake of meeting me in there, fearing his kin more than I. Such familiarity with the Casino means knowledge of the service door that flies open and shut too often to be locked during peak hours, making it easy to get inside – unlike the mark’s office. However, his pit boss has a key as well as a temper, so it’s not long before he escorts some intolerably lucky fool into their back room to massage his fists. Reliving him of his consciousness and key, I leave him in the hands of the card counter he almost beat to death – spot him working a different house weeks later with a brand new set of false teeth, so he ought to count himself fortunate for the hand he was dealt that night.

Montecristos have terrible taste in décor, this one most of all, and the gaudy vault that he keeps himself in like a piece of artwork is full of high-placed vantage points to wait for the change in guards. They’re paid handsomely for their services to the last unpruned limb of the family tree, unlike the dealers on the floor who make barely enough to survive and served as excellent recruits with such fast fingers as to ensure the House always wins. They’re chosen for smarts, unlike the security, who crowd to the site of a tacky lamp knocked over to draw them away from the door. I let myself into Montecristo’s office to find the mark poring over cheques at his desk; ‘You? What do you want?’ is all he says before it dawns upon him, and by then it’s already too late. Bled like a piglet, even with such a small incision to the neck–

Emily pulls away from the pages reeling, the footsteps in the hallway not the only thing that keep her from reading further, and turns to look at the other side of the room. She hasn’t put the rest of her clothes on yet, shirt left crumpled on the bed, but the only thing to appear around the door is four fingers, holding onto the edge and proceeding no further.

“Emily?” Daud inquires, and while one instinct is to dash across the room and ward him off as she redresses and rearms herself, she’s not convinced she wants to move from the spot she’s fixed in, not with the trove of information she holds between her hands and all the questions it raises.

“Yes?” she replies simply, letting him read it as permission that she’s delighted he seeks before entering his own room. He stops as soon as he sees her, whether it’s because of the book in her hands or that she’s half-clothed – still decent, at least given that he’s seen her in as good as her undergarments before – is a choice morsel to work over. She strikes while the iron is still hot, indicating with a small tilt of her hands to the tome between them. “What are these?”

He takes an age to respond, like it’s hard for him to remember even with so obvious a question that she hardly needs to ask it, and finally answers, “Records.”

“Of what?” she presses, not finding what he gives her satisfactory, but his position shifts suddenly off the back foot and he comes at her with an edge she can recognise as the same Daud who put
pen to these pages as sharply as he’d once used a blade on the people written in them.

“You’re reading it, you tell me,” he retorts, impatient as ever with questions she knows the answer to but wants to hear him say anyway. She tears her gaze away from him and returns it to the shelves.

“Are they all like this?” She’s heard the tales, but to see such a physical representation of the scale of his slaughter is overwhelming.

“Like what?” he responds resentfully.

“About,” she falters for a moment while deciding what to call it, knowing what she’d like to say, but considering that treading carefully usually gets her further than blunt demands with him, “your work,” she settles, even as part of her loathes to describe the ‘business’ of murder so neutrally.

“Not all of them,” he answers gruffly, unlikely to be so compliant were she to wring the guilt out of him that she knows well enough is there.

“Then how many are such... records?” she probes, falling on his terminology in lack of anything else springing to mind that wouldn’t be unnecessarily provocative, like murder diaries.

He mutely gestures mid-way along the shelves, where upon closer inspection the uniform nature of the books begins to change, the neatly printed dates turning into cursive titles penned in the same hand. She spots one at hand-height that simply reads ‘The Outsider’ and feels an instinctive pull towards it like a riptide.

His indication still equates to over half the wall’s worth of death accounts, most likely scribed from the desk within an arm’s reach of her looking out these louvered window over the picturesque grounds. They must have taken years to compile, but the next question she puts to him is trickier than that.

“Why did you write them?” He looks at her not out of accusation, but with struggle in his face that makes her think he’s probably never had to explain why he would turn himself to so morbid a task.

“It’s what happened,” he offers at last, and it follows that there’s probably no true chronicles of his work, or certainly none so accurate as to come from the Knife’s pen himself.

She knows of a Penny Novel that circulates the slums, finding its way into courtly hands to be quickly concealed should she walk into the room; yet another source of rumours that she’d done everything she could to block out, not wanting to know anything fictional or otherwise about the enduring legend of the Knife of Dunwall.

“Do you mind?” she asks him, tilting the open book in her hands with a sudden need to know whether he wants her reading something so personal – not because it’ll affect whether she does it or not, but just to know what he feels about it. She watches his shoulders raise and lower with a deep breath, not quite a sigh, more like he’s got a firm hand on the tiller of emotion.

“Why would I mind?” he says roughly, like honesty is stripping his voice ever rawer. “It’s the truth.” Such an answer is devastating somehow, perhaps because it – like everything else about him – is too complex to accord simple understanding. His history is a closed book, fixed as these records and unchanged by anything he or anyone else has done since; nothing to stop it being plucked off its shelves and opened, the only question being why anyone would want to.

She glances back at the bookshelves and unable to coherently process such a body of information, closes the volume and sets it back in place while noting the dates; 1830-32. The intrusive
calculation of how she wasn’t even five years old while he was bleeding men like pigs about as subtle as the dagger in the back that brought her here.

“Did you call on me for something?” she diverts, feeling somewhat more exposed standing in front of him without a book partially shielding her barely-modest undergarment, and crosses her arms like that might help somehow. The sleep dart is still hidden under the rumpled mess of her clothing and sheets in his bed – a miracle she didn’t wake up having rolled onto it, really.

“She’ll be leaving shortly,” he replies, meaning the trader of course, which shouldn’t but does come as somewhat of a surprise.

“So soon?” she comments, not moving from her spot. “It’s barely been a day.”

“She’s to get to the capital for market day,” he says offhandedly, and she puzzles how he refers to Karnaca as such.

She’d forgotten the purpose of the trader’s visit isn’t social, and it’s a strange thought to know things grown by the Knife of Dunwall would be unknowingly traded in the markets down on the coast. That the people who consume them will be none the wiser, and the taste no different for the deeds of the man who grew them. “She has some things for you.”

“Oh, of course,” she mumbles with a lump in her throat. “I’ll just… finish dressing.”

He gives a silent nod and is gone, not having moved more than a step into his own room, though nor has she taken one from her place either – like a single movement towards one another would flip them like magnets from repelling to snapping together.

The bulls have been tethered back onto the front of the caravan, cattle collected from far-flung corners of the grounds and rounded back into a herd by the ever-diligent dog who still wants nothing to do with her. The trader stands at the centre the terrace puffing a cigar next to the table as Emily strolls outside, having donned the rest of her clothing and returned the sleep dart to its hiding place, still without the dagger she simply let Daud take off her, distracted as she’d been by his hand under her shirt.

She’s scarce time left to meet his latest challenge, but is immediately consumed by the woman’s enthusiastic greeting, chewing a cigar in one corner of her mouth as she lifts a sheet of fabric with Emily’s chosen pattern and shakes it out to billow like flag as she approaches. It’s for her, she deduces.

“Ah, thank you… uhma,” she says a little starchily, though the address clearly has a positive impact, because the woman reaches up to give a firm – and fond, she thinks – pat of her cheek. She throws an urgent look at Daud as she takes the piece of cloth that doesn’t look like any kind of garment she’s familiar with. “Am I supposed to wear this?” she whispers underhandedly, thankful the woman doesn’t understand their conversation, and scowls at the chuckle he gives in response.

“Yes,” he answers. “Though you may not be familiar with the style of dress.”

“It’s a dress?” she quizzes, having suspected there was a reason the woman hadn’t taken adequate measurements of her lower half.

“Yes,” he answers crisply. “They’re traditional on the isle she hails from.”
Emily is only vaguely familiar with the style of clothing, and even though the trader wears long robes that she’s hardly paid attention to in the midst of all her other alien behaviour, none of which helps her make sense of what she’s looking at.

“But… it’s flat,” she murmurs, and he scoffs again.

“It wraps,” he explains, offering a few words to the woman who immediately begins pulling various attached braids to the fabric and holding up parts of it with what is presumed to be a descriptive narrative that is entirely lost on her – and if the woman thinks she’s going to ask Daud for guidance on putting it on then she’s very much mistaken.

“Thank you,” she says again, though more in an attempt to stave off her fussing, taking the stretch of fabric over her arm and smiling enthusiastically, hoping that to be the end of things.

Not so, as her hands are no sooner empty than she’s coming back to Emily with a tinted glass bottle, holding it out to her with an elaborate explanation that she recites while pulling out the stopper and gesticulating at her head.

“… For your hair,” Daud translates in an uncomfortable and unusually brief way that doesn’t quite make sense, given the lengths she spoke at.

“I got that impression,” she replies, taking the vial and passing it under her nose for a fragrant waft of scents, and then speculating as to the root of his discomfort, begins asking, “Did you-”

“No,” he replies quickly. “That’s her gift to you.”

“Oh,” she sounds. “How do I give her my thanks?” He recites a phrase she vaguely recognises and does her best to repeat it, evoking more pleased chatter from the woman, concluding in the pulling down of Emily’s face to press bold kisses on each of her cheeks before she finally moves on, starting to heap her enthusiasm upon Daud, who bears it as ever with enduring good grace.

Finally free from the woman’s ministrations, she watches him walk her up to the cart, offering the same hand as she climbs up that he invited her down on. She raises an arm up high in departure, and then with the clanking of cattle bells and snap of reins, commands the bulls forward and the procession begins to slowly roll away.

It’s only when she looks away that Emily realises it means they’re alone again – and she forgot to do anything with the sleep dart still digging into her chest. She could to salvage it now, but is somehow too overwhelmed to disrupt the moment by falling into the easy pattern of violence.

“I suppose I won’t be needing this anymore,” she sighs, reaching into her shirt as he comes pacing back up and pulling the uncomfortable dart free. He gives her a look so alarmed she might laugh if she weren’t annoyed about not managing to beat this sub-section of this challenge – although she’d technically done the 'not getting caught' part already, she still rationalises to herself.

“What were you planning to do with that?” he remarks in a gravelly, amusement-ridden lilt.

“Prove a point, I suppose,” she replies, twirling it between her fingers. “You may have taken my knife, but I had a backup plan.”

“Hm,” he murmurs in a way that might be approving before posing, “and if you’d succeeded in drugging me?”

“It’s empty,” she points out, stopping her fiddling and holding it up. “Though in the real world I suppose I could have filled it with poison, or lured you to some suitable spot while you succumbed
“Not bad,” he seems to evaluate, knowing that she could’ve tried to stick him with it all the same but didn’t bother – not challenging enough without an ever-present, overly talkative woman who it’s already feeling too quiet without her sweeping around the place warbling sea shanties or talking at length to anyone who’ll listen in a foreign tongue.

“I try,” she returns what she thinks is mirthfully, but when his ambling walk back to the house draws close to her, as if he doesn’t think – or can’t help himself – he lifts a curled hand to tap lightly under her chin.

“You’re starting to think like an assassin,” he delivers; a twisted compliment that chills her like a bucket of ice-water.

“Is that a good thing?” she asks more honestly than she intends, yet the look he returns is equally raw.

The answer, like him, is not cut along clear lines.

“You tell me.”

Chapter End Notes

There is an artist by the name of themightynyunyi on tumblr who has done a lot of really *excellent* drawings of her majesty in her underwear, and has definitely provided ample fuel for my 'Emily with her hair down' requirements, though I'm imagining here Ems has something much similar to the early iterations of the fabric bra, circa 1920 or so.

Re. dresses in Dishonored, to stay on the topic of clothing, I totally love the aesthetic and other implications of the choices for female fashion in the Dishonored world, but that doesn't mean I won't still play dress up and delight in the idea of dresses being a thing that exist but most people in Gristol and the more 'civilised society' are completely *bamboozled* by them.

Oh also Daud's murder diaries... not a thing I had in mind for him at the outset of this story, but as I built his room out I definitely wanted some sign of his literacy and the really rather elegant way he's been shown to write in the games. Wanting a whole wall of books meant I had to figure out well how does he get them there, and then the rest all got filled in backwards. It made more and more sense as I padded it out, and while it's definitely a pretty morbid thing to do, I really liked the idea of there not being a 'true' record of what Daud's done over his 30-odd year career except in his head, so spending long winter nights scratching away at a desk to write them all down is a weird kind of therapy as well as creating a completely unique record. Lotta fun writing the excerpt from him but dang tricky.
The Thirty-Seventh Lesson

Chapter Summary

More than anything Emily wants to understand, not just assassins, but him. – Yet the closer she gets, the more dangerous the implications of knowing seem.

Chapter Notes

This is a good one. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s so quiet in the peace left by the trader’s departure that Emily feels out of place pressing Daud about challenges, especially in light of her most recent failure. She’s a head full of things to contemplate before distracting herself chasing after him like a game of cat and mouse anyway – such as what effect said games are having on her, or whether learning to think and act like an assassin is helping in the way it’s supposed to.

What isn’t helping is the extensive catalogue of this particular assassin’s deeds lying just behind his door, which she still can’t get out of her head. It goes without question that she needs to get back in there and devour the writings, but the heart of his personal space is the last place she feels she ought to be right now.

Looking for something to take her mind off tracking down wherever he’s disappeared to, or worse yet sneaking into his room to read – whatever the dire consequences of that might be – she sets upon the tincture gifted to her by the trader. Holding a finger over the neck of the glass bottle and tipping it upside down, she discovers some kind of oil that releases a blend of scents as she rubs it between her fingers, nothing like the assaulting perfumes of Dunwall designed to overwhelm even the smell of plague.

For your hair, she recalls, running a hand thoughtfully through her roots and feeling grainy soil still present after the mud-bath she inadvertently gave herself yesterday. She resolves to wash before anything else and sets off as the afternoon sun begins to wane.

In a rare move indicative of how comfortable she’s become – or how little she’s left to be concerned about – she sets out a couple of full buckets next to the shower before stripping off completely. Scrubs away every last piece of grit with soap she’s hardly bothered to use before now, cleansing herself like it will somehow add clarity to the rest of her less practically-solved issues.

She returns to the house much satisfied, but is reluctant to spend too long ruining her newly reclaimed clean in dirty clothes and goes straight up to her room. The heat is omnipresent but more tolerable when she sits naked on the bed slowly brushing out her hair, water trickling down her chest and back.

She takes the oil the trader gifted her and wets her fingers with it, working it through the great mass of her untamed hair, no less therapeutic when she does it for herself. The perfume rises as she
combs everything out root to tip, heady scents wrapping around her in a way that hangs her eyelids low across her eyes, breathing deep.

The curious garment she’s been gifted is the only clean thing she has to wear, so she concedes to investigate how the purported clothing is at least supposed to be worn. She tries to remember the instructions the woman provided and finds it far more challenging than she anticipates, the curious robe not seeming to make any sense even with the guidance she’d been given.

*It wraps,* she remembers like the ringing of a far-off clocktower bell over which she’s no control. Knowing which side is supposed to be up, she holds the sheet out behind her and with incrementally slow movements starts to fold one arm in front, slowly encasing herself in the material like she’s waiting for something to happen.

What she discovers is that the tightly wound braid attached to one end of the cloth feeds through a hold around the level of her waist on the other side. She tentatively pushes it through and realises as she pulls it round that tailored shapes at the corners are designed to cover her chest; cups that fit with an accuracy that testifies to the woman’s ability to size her up with a firm grasp and a few careful darts in the fabric, then taper into more braids wound of the same cloth.

She finally solves the riddle of how the thing works – *maybe* - as she folds the other side over the first, passing one of the braids around her waist before raising another set to fasten behind her neck, pinching and pulling at the result until she’s sure there’s nothing else to be done with it. The feeling is *unusual,* to say the least, and she’s not completely convinced she’s put it on right, given how the chest plunges all the way to her breastbone and makes it impractical to wear anything else underneath.

There’s no way of seeing how it really looks, suffice to say that it covers her semi-sufficiently and is certainly cooler than everything else she has to wear – though with almost no back to speak of that’s unsurprising. She walks carefully around her room massaging her fingers through her hair and shaking it dry, falling into waves the oil seems to be set on encouraging in a mane normally tamed with a hot brush and tied up before given the chance to coil of its own accord.

With a feast of leftovers to make use of there’s little need for cooking, so she creeps downstairs feeling like she’s wearing some kind of dressing gown and is surely missing a vital part of the ensemble. Her legs feel particularly exposed, especially when the edges of the dress pull away from each other and split past bare knees as she walks.

She’s hungry in spite of such an expansive lunch, and not finding Daud in the kitching starts uncovering leftover dishes set along the counter, taking a few choices outside and setting a table before she even realises she’s doing it. Not wanting to suffer the awkwardness of undoing the half-done job, she carries on and formulates throwaway comments about how she wasn’t thinking about anything in particular as she laid the table for their dinner – as if it’s something they’re openly admitting to doing.

She’s just put out water and cups, tucking pleasingly fragrant hair that less-pleasingly won’t stay out of her face behind an ear when he comes up from the grounds, stopping just before the terrace and leaning against one of the pillars of the trellis like he’s afraid to step underneath. He doesn’t say a word, just stands there watching.

“What?” she accuses, feeling the flush creep right down her neck in a way that her clothing doesn’t disguise whatsoever. “Am I wearing it correctly?”

He’s giving her that look she’d once puzzled, the intense gaze that shuts out anything and everything else, and clearing his throat gives a broken murmur of, “Ah, yes,” before turning away
to pace towards the washing area – strange, given he was approaching the house.

She’s in the kitchen when she sees him coming back, shirt open and still running with fresh water as he slides a hand back through his hair and doesn’t look at her in passing, even though she’s sure he knows she’s there, watching out the window as he walks around to the terrace and soon sounds at the door behind her.

“Do you want any wine?” she asks without turning around.

“Better not,” he murmurs in reply, and she places each of his footsteps with careful precision as he crosses the room and drags the heinous weight he hauls around out behind him.

He comes back out in a shirt that’s new, of course he does, looking suspiciously freshly shaved and every inch the threat when he finally sits down across from her at the table under the mixed light of a setting sun and newly lit lanterns. What kind of threat she wouldn’t like to specify.

“So,” she begins when it seems clear he’s unable or unwilling to break the silence himself. “I didn’t pass your last challenge.”

“Hm,” he hums, but doesn’t add anything more – seeming fixated on serving himself, all the courtesy of yesterday disappeared.

“Well… what happens now?” she prompts, and he looks up at her only briefly before turning his attention back down to the meal scrapped together from cold cuts.

“In what sense?” he puts to his plate.

“If I were… what happened if others didn’t pass a stage of the programme?” she sets out, and doesn’t really like having to discuss her own failure quite so much – though he’s clearly reluctant to do so, rarely enough.

“Others would already be working by now,” he murmurs hoarsely. “If you miss the window, wait for another.”

“I can’t very well wait six months for her to return,” she points out facetiously.

“Exactly,” he snaps, and looks up to her with sudden intensity to demand, “So when does this end?”

“This?” she echoes with a rush of insult and maybe even a little injury. “That should be for you to answer, it’s your programme.”

“I told you, you’d already be working by now,” he mutters, looking back down. “Learning on the job under the supervision of someone more experienced.”

“That’s supposed to be you, isn’t it?” she counters. “Besides, I’ve still yet to find your precious moment while you try to do the same… just without the challenge of avoiding company.”

She doesn’t like having to define her own lessons, but is finding her tutor severely lacking in them tonight – and the programme can’t be over, because then she would be contemplating leaving, which she swore she wouldn’t do until she beat him.

“You don’t-” he breaks off, putting fingers to his face and pinching his brow. “I can’t keep doing
“Doing what?” she retorts in quick succession.

“Has it occurred to you,” he recites with painstaking effort, “that I’m having a hard time trying to keep my hands off you?”

“Oh,” she enunciates rather too much, and then in her own downcast tone adds, “Don’t say that.”

“Why?” he asks suspiciously, looking at her across the table like it’s the most significant thing to come between them and not her mother’s grave.

“Because it makes me want you to stop.” She eyes her food, and there’s no point denying or dancing around it – not if it’s the truth, as he said himself.

“Ah,” he sounds throatily, and then like he doesn’t damn-well know queries, “Stop what?”

“Trying,” she spits guiltily. “Why, do you think you’re the only one having such trouble?”

He lets out a sigh that seems to contain far more air than he can possibly hold, a hand rising back to his face to rub across his brow again, worrying at his scar habitually as he gives his head a pitying shake.

“Don’t tell me that,” he rasps. “Please, Emily.”

He’s a fine one to talk, because those words from his mouth do something uncontrollable to her – hearing him *plead*. It throws her head-first into the conclusion that with everything that’s happened between them, sitting across the table fighting themselves instead of each other makes no sense at all. Not when he could be using those words he skirts around until they wear his rusty voice out.

She stands up to begin a determined prowl around to his side of the table like a cat preparing to strike, trailing her fingertips along the grainy tabletop. He watches with a face that suggests he’s running that ever-present calculation of whether to run or fight, but she’s not known him to be a running man thus far.

True to form he follows one leg after the other and turns around on the bench, keeping his eyes on her and shoulders square as she moves around him, putting his back to the meal and facing the dying twilight over the grounds. Still can’t back down, even if he won’t throw the first punch.

Speaking with careful deliberation, she offers a simple instruction as she comes to stop in front of him, shadows dancing around her strange silhouette from the evening light.

“Say that again.”

He looks up like the effort of keeping himself where he is has stripped him bare, but only after obvious consideration does he open his mouth again to finally tell her what she wants to hear.

“Please?” he repeats curiously.

Then like it’s what he asked for – rather than to stop luring him to the edge of his restraint as if she’s not just as liable to lose her footing as he is – she sinks to sit across his knees with arms crooked over each of his shoulders, looking intently into his face. That he lets her is one answer, and while there’s some familiarity with times he’s carried her to and fro bereft of the ability to do so herself, the intention makes the simple act feel more like the ascent of a cliff face.
“Why are we doing this?” she asks, trying to reconcile her balance across his legs with the limitations of movement the dress puts on her – no wonder they never caught on further north – and not failing to notice one of his hands coming to rest along the small of her back for support.

“That’s what I should be asking you,” he returns as if his other hand isn’t moving for her knee, spreading out flat over the layers of fabric that make up the skirt of the dress she’s convinced he’s having a time dealing with on her – traditional, she recalls him saying, and wonders what else it provokes in him.

“Well I don’t see what exercising restraint helps,” she states in a deliberately abstract fashion, permitting a single indicative movement as she runs fingertips down the groove in the back of his neck, thrilled that she feels him flex into it. But a response isn’t what she wants. She wants to see him break, not bend, so makes herself calculatingly attainable only if he moves first.

“You talk of restraint?” he wonders like it’s incredible she can even use the term.

“Yes,” she affirms, shifting her weight on him before asking in her most deadly tone yet, “What does it prove, Daud, if we both want it but do nothing?”

Whether it’s the paraphrase of his own favourite question, the way she uses his name, or most likely hearing her admit that she wants what he does, he lets out a wordless noise at the same time as his hand shifts up her back. Traversing from fabric onto skin, he pulls her to him like there was never a question that he could, catching her mouth with lips already in motion, far from the static resistance that has characterised him before.

While he’s kissed her before, what he’d done was given her a kiss – on two occasions, granted – and then reciprocated on another, but none of it compares to the act of kissing her as he does now. By merit of her perch in his lap she’s slightly higher up than him for once, enjoying the change in levels and way it makes him turn upwards, straining to keep his mouth on hers as she gradually tightens her arms around his shoulders.

She inquisitively lifts herself just out of reach, pulling them apart with a wet noise that almost completely overwhelms any fortitude to remain separate, pausing for a breath and finding his eyes to hold a tense gaze as she tests him. The sound he makes from his throat runs through her as if she’s been strung on him like a violin string, and in unprecedented delivery of what she seeks he pulls her assertively back into him.

It’s intoxicating in a way nothing before now has touched, not just the physical gratification or thrill of being desired, but having such power over someone who once dictated the path her life would take – for someone who’d had that control to be so pliable and desperate in her hands, while his own inches further up her leg.

She escalates a poorly demarcated series of kisses that barely toe the line of satisfaction, opening her mouth and waiting for him to follow suit before searching for his tongue with hers; a carefully exploratory venture that last all of a few seconds’ brush before he gives the shudder she’s angling for and withdraws his mouth from hers.

The hand that’s been charting its way up her mostly bare back reaches the top of her spine, but rather than retreating when their exchange becomes too intense, he only holds the base of her neck between thumb and forefinger, exerting almost indiscernible force as he tilts her head away from him and moves his face against the exposed length of her neck.

Making a noise that she’s in no way proud of, the notion occurs that he’s had just as long as she has to catalogue her weak points. Even before this whole hot mess started she’d been jumping like he
was electrically charged whenever his hands made contact with the normally unapproachable terrain beyond her collar; so looking back, she doesn’t know how she hadn’t seen any of it sooner.

She tightens the anchorage of her arms around his shoulders and twists to face him more directly, stretching as she lets him roll her head around and put his lips to her throat. Each damp spot left by his mouth as he scales her neck like a winding staircase comes up cold in the absence of the warmth he lays against it, and she temporarily loses track of what she thinks about anything when he hits a soft point just on the underside of her jaw, almost shaking him off before turning urgently back down to sink into a kiss that’s more hunger than she planned on showing.

This is supposed to be about him wanting her, yet when he meets her like he does, finally, blessedly present after holding himself so far away from her for so long, it’s all she can do just to draw herself over him like beaching on a rock – and not grab the hand that rests too chastely midway along her leg and pull it higher.

The next kiss that ventures into tongues doesn’t result in a flinching retreat from him this time, slipping across each other until she draws it to a close, lifting her mouth and taking what feels like three or four breaths she’s skipped.

“What is it you want?” he asks practically against her as they draw apart, and she adjusts her grip to hold him by the thick rope of muscle running from a shoulder up to his neck, like she’ll wash away without something to hang onto.

“I don’t know,” she answers softly, stumbling almost by accident into a kiss that’s barely more than a brush of their lips over each other.

“That’s not an answer,” he rumbles, roughened fingertips skating across the smooth skin of her back like scratching an itch that only becomes known when contact is made.

“But it’s the truth,” she insists, or as close as makes no difference – she’s not foolish enough to get into trying to explain what being wanted by him does to her. She doesn’t even understand in her own mind why she craves it enough to overwhelm every good reason she shouldn’t, so is being about as honest with him as she can figure out for herself right now.

Exhausted by the tension, or perhaps just the release of it, she exhales like she's pushing out the haze that’s been fogging her mind and unthinkingly leans into him. His arm slides further around her in response, wrapping her in a simple embrace as if it’s anything like enough.

His face sits against the lower half of hers, toughened shape of his scar pressing into her cheek, almost eye-to-eye with the wholly grey streak on one side of his head. She brings her fingers to his temple and runs fingertips curiously back through silvered hair, hearing a breath catch in his throat before feeling it spread across the exposed skin of her chest, a small squeeze of his arm around her the only other indication he gives in response.

“Though… there is one thing I want,” she begins carefully, unsure how long they’ve even been in silence – how easily time slips away in this place. He gives an inquisitive murmur, no outward signs of life in him aside from a tiny movement of his thumb back and forth against her leg. “Let me read your journals,” she reveals, not sure why she’s phrasing it as a request when he’s never suggested he’d stop her, or even described them as such.

“They’re yours,” he replies in a low rasp, then begins extracting his profile from hers like an intricate piece of machinery. “Although,” he issues, looking up at her with his deeply lined-face that she can’t seem to look at anymore without being taken in by the features of – how she missed him being handsome under all the scars and scowls is a testament to her mental fortitude, if
nothing else – and with a light tickle of his fingertips over her back that she does her best not to respond to adds, “You’ll have to get up first.”

“How,” she mimics thoughtfully, a restless hand roaming the terrain between his shoulder and neck with an ironlike grip she’s used to concealing back in Dunwall, where the Empress’s physical prowess is meant to be kept a hushed secret. She leans in a little, though not enough to bring them back to the same heated exchange of before as she remarks, “A challenge I believe I can meet.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter, unsurprisingly, is genuinely one of my favourites (no I mean it), and oh boy was it good to write. The line about necks and staircases is absolutely one of my top lines in the whole story.

There’s a line pretty much outright lifted from a Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn film, Charade (boat scene; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7T-9mXdud1M) in here, and chapters like this probably reflect my Old Hollywood romantic stylings more than anything. Where the *only* sensible thing to do after a steamy kiss is a charged embrace because censorship and other things required filmmakers to pull out all the tricks while portraying romance on screen. All very atmospheric, and perfect for the slow burn.

I’m gonna take a moment here to say it’s been a lot of fun getting these two here, and every time I have a moment of doubt I remind myself this is my story so it’s going to get written the way I want it, which is all the mushy trash-ship garbage that I’ve come from and inevitably return to. Going forward this might be the point where some people who never quite settled with the pairing may start drifting away, which if that’s you in any capacity - that’s fine! Thanks for reading at all! No shade! Au Revoir!

*Lights cigarette at the end of a long holder*

... Now it's just us trash people left, full steam ahead and show me that horizon.
The Thirty-Eighth Lesson

Chapter Summary

With a library to choose from, Emily hardly knows where to begin.

Chapter Notes

After the dizzying heights of last chapter, perhaps I would be expected to calm down with this one. Whether it does is down to you to judge I suspect.

“Where should I start?” asks Emily, standing before a bookcase taller than she is holding more information about Daud than she could hope to absorb in several years, much less hours. He hangs behind her warily, supervising as if she might not be able to be trusted in here alone.

“What do you want to know?” he responds.

The books are all dated, numbers that mean things to him without the need for further markings, and she can just make out the earliest brackets in the highest far-left corner of the shelves that dominate his room; 1811-14 split across three volumes, then continuing with 1818-20. She wonders what happened in those lost years, though it’s not what she ends up asking.

“When did it become a job?” she puts to him, and he rubs a hand pensively over his newly scraped jaw as he mulls it over.

“It was always a job,” he tries at first.

“You know what I mean,” she retorts, giving him a sharp look that he receives with an amused turn, like he’s aware she’s sparring with him for sport and not because she truly means it.

“First started trying to make a profit off it in the twenties,” he issues in a raspy purr, and if she’d known sitting in his lap would make him so conducive to questioning she might have done it a lot sooner. “Took a few years to get right… though it wasn’t ‘til the thirties that I stopped seeing it as anything more than a livelihood.”

She scans along the shelves, noticing the way the volumes spread out, single years broken across many volumes – when business was booming. It’s all too much in a way, and she recognises she’s little hope of finding her way unguided.

“What would you recommend?” she asks farcically, which amuses him even more. He paces up to the stacks, his presence around her burning like recently lit signal flares, and scans the titles with a far sharper eye than she could hope to apply.

“Start here,” he suggests, reaching over her with the warmth coming off him felt by her own body, sliding a book off the shelf and holding it out in front of her, arm slightly curved around her waist.
as he stands a mere step behind. The spine reads 1825 (1).

“The same year my mother’s reign began,” she remarks quietly, caught somewhere between regretting what she’s gotten into with the man who’d put an end to it and wanting to repeat everything all over again – whatever sense that makes. While she could turn around now and perhaps something would happen, instead she just takes the dusty tome in her hands.

“I know,” he replies unapologetically. “It might help you to know my business during that time.”

“I’m sure I’m familiar with much of it,” she counters curtly; as much as she tried to paint her late mother’s legacy in the best possible light, it was a fraught and unstable time by even the fondest historian’s recollection – there are seven full volumes in this year alone – and she doesn’t take him for a sympathetic scholar.

“You may be surprised,” he rumbles, and perhaps deliberately leaves it at that. She thumbs through a few pages, sheet after sheet of the same irregularly regular handwriting, plenty of time to practice and refine the script into something no printing press could hope to capture the spidery fluidity of. Glancing back to the shelves, she finds the end of his so-called ‘records’ on a lone volume marked 1837 and a dreadful thought occurs to her.

“Did you cover the end as well as beginning?” she asks with tension pulled completely taut, knowing what it will provoke in him and not caring – it’s the truth, after all.

“No,” he answers, withdrawing across levels as he steps away from her and drifts over to the desk, staring out the window like there’s anything to see in the darkness. “I never finished,” he continues without needing to be asked, a success that lasts only briefly as he stumbles into a broken, “Couldn’t-” She says nothing, waiting like a snare to see if he’ll finish of his own accord, but it never comes.

“Couldn’t what?” she prompts gently, no anger in her voice like there might once have been. While she hasn’t even nearly made her peace with what happened, or his inarguably significant role in it, what she wants is to know why he can’t bring himself to write an account of his last job. Not climb up on a podium and cast her fury at him like striking an anvil with nothing on it.

“... Find the right words,” he finishes solemnly.

She’d thought he might not want to relieve the experience – she’s no fondness for doing so either, though rarely has a choice in the matter where her sleeping mind is concerned – but his harrowed expression makes her doubtful he’s never revisited that terrible event. Certainly not with her hanging around reminding him of it at every opportunity, at least. On which point.

“Perhaps I can aide your memory should you decide to undertake the task,” she replies caustically, confident that she already does, and the bitter twist in his mouth is rather delectable – perhaps because he wouldn’t endure such torment from anyone except her, and even then appears to only just manage.

Thumbing through the book he’s chosen for her, she starts strolling towards the armchair that must be comfortable enough if he’s fallen asleep in it before, but hasn’t gotten more than a few paces before he clicks his tongue at her.

“Oh no you don’t,” he intervenes. “Take it upstairs.”

“What?” she demands, wheeling around on him full of outrage. “I’m… not ready to go upstairs.” It sounds silly, but what else is she to say?
“Then outside,” he insists.

“I can read your accounts of death wrought by your hands, but not from your chair?” she phrases in a way that makes it sound exactly as ridiculous as it is.

“Right,” he confirms without shame.

“Why?” she decries more than she truly asks for a reason.

“If you get settled it’ll be a task to move you on,” he answers firmly, and she’s more shocked than she ought to be to realise he’s thinking as many steps ahead as that – at least as many as she is. Remembering just who she’s dealing with, she cuts straight to the point.

“Well surely I can-”

“No,” he interrupts surely. “You can’t.”

“Why not?” she asks with a scowl. “After-”

“You sleep in your room, Emily,” he issues like a prison sentence. Unfortunately for him, hearing such a stern order from his mouth only makes her want the opposite even more than she’d tentatively been daring to consider.

“You let me sleep in here before,” she argues.

“That was different,” he says in a way that makes it perfectly clear that he’s no intention of fooling with her, figuratively or otherwise.

“But why not?” she ends up repeating guilelessly, and only as she says it does recollection chime like a clock of what she’s driven out of him with that question before. Except this time he doesn’t yield.

“You know why,” he tells her in a tone like dark honey, sticky and bitter as it is sweet. The next comment is not so kind. “I’m going to bed.” As much as it might begrudge her to admit, she can see he’s tired – hasn’t taken a long nap in the middle of the day in his bed, like she has.

“Fine,” she replies begrudgingly, but then out of some disfigured instinct borne of contradiction and outright pettiness, strides up to him and stands there with her chin turned up. “But you’re going to have to do better than that for a goodnight.” He’s mistaken if he thinks she’s leaving without dragging out some acknowledgement of what he’s been so hard-pressed to share even when it directly concerns her.

He huffs with something that could be scorn as well as amusement, but still takes her chin in fingers so warm against her skin that part of her considers perhaps it wouldn’t be any cooler sleeping down here – at least not if the rest of him radiates like that.

“And what would be better?” he poses as he holds her face in his hand like a looking glass, though what he sees in it is beyond her fathom.

She is defiant in her response, following his example as she replies, “You know what.”

He makes a low noise in his throat, and playing as if he’s really at her beck and call, leans in to lay an immaculately constrained kiss against her mouth. Lips press to hers like sealing a letter, then without pulling too far away he moves around to her ear to murmur, “Go to bed,” into it like that’s going to make her want anything except the opposite.
Yet battles must be chosen – especially with him – and on this occasion she’s forced to beat a reluctant retreat to her room. She turns herself to the chronicles of his deeds by lamplight instead, opening to the first entry and rolling the final dice on whether she’ll be able to look at him in the morning.

Daud wasn’t wrong when he said the chronicles of his ‘business’ in the months that birthed her mother’s fragile reign might surprise her.

While the pages contain many a high profile assassination or disappearance Emily was already aware of, for every mark whose death made the popular press there must be three more whose tales never made it to print. Relatives of people she knows, even those she associates with daily, who have regaled with perfect composure to her that so-and-so fell to illness or plague, only to find the account of their demise told in his surprisingly elegant prose.

Furthermore, of the deaths that she knows anything about less than half are attributed to the right source – while the Knife of Dunwall may have executed a contract to popular knowledge, his clients were more seldom known – and speculation, it seemed, was oft wrong. Only Daud has ever known the full truth, which is poured painstakingly into these volumes for no one – except her, now – to read.

She’s learned more than she could’ve ever imagined about the messy scrabbling for power that began as her grandfather’s health began to wane; the depth of the political machinations never so clear as seen through the contracts of who eliminated who – those that purged their own families and organisations to retain power before turning ruthlessly on others, or the ones that cannibalised themselves only after wreaking havoc over their rivals when there was nothing left to ravage.

She thinks it must have made him a very rich man, but then recalls that he didn’t act alone – the spoils were divided and cost of operations not insignificant. If she only had his financial records, should any such exist, then she could really get to grips with the economics of it, likely astounding every tutor who had urged her towards the subject in the past.

What is most surprising is how little it changes her opinions of him; perhaps because she’s learned his ethics already, and everything she reads only makes them more concrete. Reading late into the night she finally understands the futile, circular nature of it all – a serpent eating its own tail – delaying the fight for sleep against uncomfortable heat. Wonders more than once what would happen should she go back downstairs, knock on his door and insist upon being unable to spend another night in her own bed – except it’s not what she wants. At least, not like that.

Because it’s one thing to pressure him into indulging, after tonight – hearing what it sounds like for him to use those rarely-exercised manners and ask her for something – she doesn’t want to simply wear him down until he gives up. She wants to bring the walls down and then be invited across the rubble; a battle that can be won fair and square, something he can’t back out of.

Emily wakes to the smell of baking bread and is drawn inexorably to the kitchen, where she presents the solution that graced her in the throes of a restless night to Daud and the loaf newly cooling from the oven.

“I have a proposal,” she announces, coming upon him with a hand propped on the counter levelling
an overly cautious look at her in her direction from the moment she walks in, prepared for her long
before she ever makes it over the threshold.

“A fine start to the day,” he responds combatively, pausing only a moment before following with,
“Did you forget to dress?” A reference to the fact that she’s still in her nightclothes, something that
she responds to with a simple roll of her eyes. Such trivialities are the last thing she has to be
concerned about, all things considered.

“It’s about my next challenge,” she continues in wilful ignorance of any attempt to divert the
course of the conversation. “So are you going to listen, or is commenting on my attire the way
you’re like to direct the programme henceforth?”

He doesn’t respond at first, drumming his fingers along the counter in a way that somehow
manages to be unnerving, and gives her a look that could compare with his gift from the Outsider
for its power to draw her across the room; a force she must stubbornly resist.

“Go on,” he issues at last.

“If I’m to hone my skills as an… understander of assassins,” she phrases cleverly, “then an
exercise in theft is surely appropriate, no?” She moves her weight from one hip to the other and it’s
so commonplace to observe him that following the cast of his eyes over her is almost a matter of
routine, though it’s certainly gratifying to be sure she’s holding his attention so wholly.

“Theft?” he echoes with an eyebrow arching irregularly up his face.

“Pickpocketing, or what-have-you,” she throws out. “You write about procuring keys and nimble
fingers often enough, yet the programme has been curiously lacking in it.”

“Hm,” he murmurs, drifting into sincere consideration she suspects. “Many of my recruits were
thieves long before I started with them.”

“Exactly,” she affirms, sparing a divergence into interrogation about the specifics of said recruits
for the time being. “In which case a modification to compensate for my unique background seems
reasonable, does it not?”

“What do you have in mind?” he draws from her.

“Simple,” she announces. “I steal a key from you.” That his first reaction is a scornful laugh makes
her half-minded to fly across the kitchen and start an altercation – though where that’d end with
things between them now is interesting enough to file away for later.

“A key to what?” he scoffs.

“Your room,” she delivers, and all the mirth rinses out of his face.

“My room doesn’t have a lock,” he points out as if it’s somehow relevant.

“Mere rhetoric,” she dismisses. “It’s a metaphor.”

“And what do you propose should you acquire such a metaphor?” he retorts, wits poor disguise for
the rising suspicion in his tone.

“If I can successfully lift it from you,” she says with careful pacing, laying it out just as she’d
conceived of last night when it’d made such brilliant sense, “then I don’t have to sleep upstairs.”
“No,” he says immediately.

“You just laughed in my face at the mere prospect of my being able to do such a thing,” she accuses. “If you’re that confident then make the bet.”

“Try the hammock if the heat’s that bad,” he diverts as if that’s all they’re talking about.

“It isn’t,” she rounds on him, and then with more gravitas restates her point. “I propose that if I can steal a key to your room, metaphorically, then you won’t turn me out of it at night.”

She phrases it diplomatically, to say the least, not because she thinks that it will make him any more likely to accept the terms, but because she can’t bring herself to actually talk about sleeping in his bed – while he’s also using it, presumably. Not without taking a rush of blood to the head so severe she’s unconvinced she could keep a straight expression while she cuts the deal, and she’s not one for blushing at the negotiation table.

“And if you don’t?” he catches carefully.

“I’ll stop asking.”

There’s a momentary flinch in his face, mere twitches of muscles as he gives her a long look that’d strip the off few clothes she’s wearing if it could, fingers resuming their patter on the counter for tense moments.

“… Very well,” he grants, and the wave that breaks over her is surprise and excitement crashing messily together; he reaches for a spoon that stands in the sugar pot, flipping it around his fingers so it spins deftly around his hand as he holds it up to her. “Your key,” he names.

“That’s a spoon,” she retorts pettily, teasing more than anything, and to hell if his smile isn’t something when he forgets himself enough to show it.

“It’s a metaphor,” he curves back at her, then with another flourish of his fingers turns it around and twists the end under the simple cord that acts as his belt. “Good luck,” he says. “You’re going to need it.”

“I thought you wanted me to fail?” she points out, settling as she lets her battle stance fall and padding further into the kitchen to lay a hand over the bread like taking the fever of a child.

“Expect you to, yes,” he murmurs as he turns back around to the counter, reaching for a box to procure another spoon for his soon-to-be ready coffee. “But want you to?” He flings a heated look over a shoulder. “I never said that.”

Chapter End Notes

Author's fav line: the one about 'like striking an anvil with nothing on it'.
Runner up: the one about Daud's smile being 'something' when he forgets himself enough to show it.
I suppose him implying he's not disagreeable to tappin' that comes in somewhere too.
Lovely turnout for comments on the last chapter, though maybe that was the chorus of FINALLYs that were screamed to the proverbial heavens. Glad to know the burny parts of the slow burn aren't disappointing as we settle into the next leg of the course *nudges eventual smut tag with an elbow*. 
The Thirty-Ninth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Even if Daud wants to lose, maybe, that doesn’t mean he’s going to make it easy for her.

Chapter Notes

So this makes it chapter 40 officially, 39 in ‘lessons’ but that's just a naming gimmick so I don't have to worry about what the chapters are named. It's a pretty absurd amount of chapters and words to put into a single story for a rarepair that is as far as I know still the only fic in existence for this pairing, but hell... I'm still enjoying it. Hope y'all will too.

Emily never imagined her latest and greatest adversary to be a spoon that Daud keeps stuffed in a belt loop at the back of his waistband – yet here she is.

The finer points of why she wants what she does enough to negotiate such unconventional stakes for the challenge aren’t too important – so she tells herself – save the fact that he won’t grant her something is reason enough to try and get it. Even, and perhaps especially if he wants it too, whatever confused rationale that follows; as if he needs to be forced into accepting what he won’t reach for, denying himself out of long-ingrained instinct.

None of it really makes sense under close analysis, but she’s already had the hands of her mother’s assassin on her in enough ways to scandalise even the more open-minded of Dunwall society, and having contemplated further acts with this murderer-for-hire some thirty years her senior, drawing a line now seems rather like locking the barn after the horse bolted some two weeks ago and has only just been noticed as gone.

However, he’s not one for doing things by half-measures either, and even it's not fully clear if he’s allowing himself to want the prize behind the curtain, what he’s not doing is making it remotely easy for her.

The first time she's close enough to reach for the ‘key’ is when he’s out in the groves of trees; getting within grabbing distance is a task in and of itself, but no sooner has she stretched out her arm for his back than he blinks and continues working several trees down without even turning around. He does this to her five times before she’s finally so annoyed that instead of reaching for the damned metaphor she grabs him by the back of his shirt. Knowing that, he lets her.

“You missed,” he taunts like he’s enjoying her torment, but lets her tug him back a step, obviously humouring her as she hauls him like a sack of laundry.

“No I didn’t,” she retorts as she drags him to face her like holding an animal by the scruff. “How many times do I have to tell you to stop holding back before you’ll actually do it?”
“At least once more, it’d seem,” he replies obtusely, settling back into himself as she releases his collar, arms folding over one another as he puts his work on pause for her – too right. “So what’s the trouble now?”

“You can’t simply… run away,” she complains, and he lifts an eyebrow.

“Evidence begs to differ.”

“Then what am I to learn from it?” she poses. “Aside from the obvious advantages of making a pact with the Outsider.”

“Don’t be so sure of that,” he mutters ominously. “His gifts are nothing like you’ve ever known.”

“Yet they seem of such use,” she replies facetiously.

“That’s what he does,” he snaps. “Use.” It rings cold, even before he warns, “Keep an eye on Corvo for that reason.”

“Is that what happened to you?” she turns around, and it certainly gets his attention – in the sense that it makes him scowl like he’s stretched razorwire between his lips. She finds herself itching for the book on his shelf with The Outsider written on its spine; perhaps later, when she gets the unquestioned access to him that she seeks.

“You forget your lessons,” he accuses in a painfully obvious distraction.

“Well, there’s just so many I’ve lost track,” she mocks, but permits the diversion with a trying sigh. “Go on, then, what am I doing wrong?”

“Just because your objective changes doesn’t mean the methodology does,” he lectures sternly. “You still need to choose the right moment, not creep behind me with one hand out hoping I don’t notice.”

“I wasn’t-” she only starts, not finishing because the look he gives her says enough. He’s not giving this feedback as material for a debate, and even though this challenge is her idea, the roles of teacher and student haven’t changed. “Very well,” she settles, “but I expect you to stop fluttering away.” She twiddles her fingers in an indicative gesture that she watches his eyes follow, and if he never looked away from her again she might be perfectly content. “Wasn’t your challenge for me to seize the fabled moment while you try to do the same thing?”

“One thing at a time,” he levels.

“I can handle it,” she insists. “I attempt to steal from you while you try to assassinate me – sounds like a perfectly reasonable arrangement.” Almost as much as letting her sleep wherever she wants, and not barring her at the door like he gets to set the boundaries for how far he lets her in.

“Then you best be prepared,” he says like he’s despairing at her audacity. She half-expects him to go for her then and there, but although it’s taken some time she’s finally competent enough that he’s as little chance getting to her when she’s on her guard as vice-versa, so they remain at loggerheads.

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned here, it’s to be prepared for you to do the unexpected,” she remarks cheekily, though the look he gives her is laden with far heavier implication, drawing into a silence that’s full to bursting with things neither of them dare to say.

He dawdles back into work and reaches above their heads to shake olives from the tree they’re
underneath, bringing them down with a rhythmic patter, some bouncing off her head and shoulders like a light rain.

“More than anything else, pickpocketing is about the little moments,” he drawls out of the thick air, dropping into a crouch and beginning to gather them from the ground with quick fingers.

He starts close to her and gets moreso, stooping to pick up a particularly large specimen that he blows the dust off of before offering it out to her. Appreciating the view looking down on him crouched just astride of her feet, she reaches out to take it – but has barely closed her fingers around it before his pinch her backside sharply enough to make her jump, his other hand sneaking up as soon as her attention wanders.

“See what I mean?” he mocks as she rubs a palm over his point of attack, torn between the thought of kicking him downhill or putting her foot on his shoulder and just keeping it there to see what happens next.

“Does it not strike you as odd,” she remarks, resting an elbow in her hand as she makes a querying gesture with the olive trapped between her fingers, “that you’re teaching me to win a challenge you’re supposed to be opposing me in?”

“Depends if you listen,” he replies smugly, dropping onto a knee that’s probably for more comfort than symbolism, but if she couldn’t get used to having him in such a position beside her. “Don’t you usually do the opposite of what I say?”

He’s got her on that.

Emily doesn’t get so much as close to Daud’s damned metaphorical key before he metaphorically kills her.

In spite of his other inclinations towards her – or maybe even because of them – he’s finally listening to her requests to stop holding back. Or it feels so when he catches her off-guard, loitering on the terrace considering whether she wants a nap in the hammock or to sneak into his room for one. For her indecision she gets neither, because he pulls her so fast that she’s slamming against the table he throws her onto before she knows what’s what, letting out a panicked gasp as the wind is knocked out of her.

She looks up at him, making hazy sense of what’s happened as his hand closes around her neck and holds her for just long and firmly enough to let her know it wouldn’t be any trouble at all for him to snap it should he be that way inclined, and her pulse races her breath in a contest she never consented to their having.

“Sure you want this?” he asks, and she wonders how many ways he means it.

“Call that subtle?” she spits hoarsely. None of the accounts of his past she’s read have involved him throwing a mark across a dining table in such spectacular fashion, but then she’s not half-way through a single volume, so there’s time yet for such extravagant ends yet.

“The job gets messy sometimes,” he murmurs ominously, but clocks her eyes clinging to his waist and fast puts a safer distance between them.

“Come back here,” she orders, still laying out on the table working the air back into her chest. “You can at least help me up.”
Surprisingly enough he does, drifting back over with a mute curiosity to settle a hand around the one she holds out, offering support that she doesn’t need but wants anyway as he tugs her upright with carefully portioned strength. Except she doesn’t stop there, lurching towards him to drop an arm over his shoulder, crowding him like she can blot out the sun over his head if she tries hard enough.

“Of course I do,” she murmurs sordidly against his cheekbone, but lets out a pained hiss when he twists her other hand as she tries to reach for the key.

“Almost,” he says daringly close to her skin without actually making contact, and then the warmth of him vanishes and she almost falls flat on her face as he blinks out of sight.

Her next attempts all end in remarkably similar failures – she’s pinned, tripped and even flipped a full somersault as every attempt to get to Daud, or the cutlery on his belt at least, turns into an opportunity for him to make a training dummy out of her.

Yet each injustice illustrates some point, which if not perfectly apparent he takes no trouble to explain in a still vaguely-patronising lecture. She avoids a scarce handful of attempts that he makes on her unprovoked, but still finds herself meeting her metaphorical maker more often than she doesn’t, and never gets close enough to actually get what she wants.

This definition is soon expanded to include any snatches of affection, which she practically tastes as they get so close she thinks he must be about to do something, only to pull away with some evasive ‘hm’ like he’s no idea what she’s angling for. Such a vicious baiting game that means by the time he’s preparing dinner she barely even knows what she wants. Maybe he isn’t human after all, like the stories tell, she considers as she waits for his routine to put them in a more confined space.

“What’s for dinner?” she announces at the kitchen door with a wealth of polite subtleties in her tone, presenting herself while he’s at the counter preparing vegetables with precise cuts of a knife – still making use of those skills.

“What would you like?” he rounds, not reacting as she walks up beside him. He’s stopped running away, as requested, but he can keep his distance with tone and pretence just fine.

“Something Pandyssian,” she requests sweetly, sidling in next to him in some facsimile of harmony they’ve never actually had, setting a palm in the middle of his back like he’s something she can just lay claim to with her touch.

“As you wish,” he murmurs, not reacting to the hand she lays against him, feeling the bumps of his spine set in muscle that she tests the firmness of approvingly as she trails it downwards.

“As you wish,” he murmurs, not reacting to the hand she lays against him, feeling the bumps of his spine set in muscle that she tests the firmness of approvingly as she trails it downwards.

“Can I help?” she offers, but in spite of the attempted distraction his fingers are soon around hers, reaching behind himself to stop her getting any closer to his waist. However, he doesn’t pull her off, just pushes in the opposite direction, starting her hand coasting up his back instead of down. It’s equally agreeable, though a less direct route to her goal.

“That’s what you think you’re doing?” he remarks wryly, throwing a sideways look as she makes it to the top of his back, practically hanging off his neck like a post she can swing from.

“Of course,” she insists, giving him a testing tug that tilts him more surely over her. She watches him stare at her mouth then back up to her eyes without moving so much as a muscle, and it makes
her want to scream. “Still can’t move first?” she asks despairingly, and the lines in his face deepen 
with an expression somewhere between mirth and desolation as he pulls in the direction he came 
from.

“How do I know you haven’t changed your mind?” he poses, and she’d headbutt him if it’d 
somehow get it into his thick skull. She settles for rolling her eyes.

“Well first of all,” she begins, kneeling her fingers demonstratively into the point between his 
shoulder and neck that she anchors off of any chance she gets, “the evidence begs to differ. Second 
of all,” she continues, picking his arm off the counter and setting it on the other side of her to better 
fill the space between him and what he’s doing with herself, “I don’t change my mind.”

He chuckles at first, but the tone quickly darkens as he rolls into, “You changed it about me.”

He’s not wrong, of course, and at one time – for a long time – she truly had wanted him dead, or 
worse. Except this way is better; he can’t look at her like an idol he’s desperate but afraid to touch 
if he’s dead.

She’s spent so long being treated as if she’s fragile – being careful and secretive so as not to put 
herself in danger, because it’s been so important with all of a kingdom resting on her shoulders to 
make sure she’s safe – such that the idea of her being able to take care of herself alone is 
unfathomable, even with the best of intentions behind it. Here it’s just her against him, and for the 
first time that’s enough; or he makes her feel like it is.

She’s grateful to her father in ways she can’t even express for forcing her into this now, even 
though she’d scorned and wanted anything but for as long as a week into the stay, until things 
finally started to click.

Because Daud doesn’t treat her like she’s made of glass. Though he avoids hurting her – less so 
today, throwing her around like a sack of potatoes and adding an assortment of new aches and 
bruises courtesy of the holds she’d lobbied so passionately to be let go of – it’s got nothing to do 
with thinking she can’t handle it. The reason he holds back is everything to do with 
him, and that’s 
something she can work with.

“Well I…” she begins, gazing up at him and choosing her words carefully, “didn’t know you.”

He makes a sound that could be a curse in a botched jaunt out of the corner of his mouth, but the 
specifics quickly become irrelevant when he stoops the rest of the distance between them and 
covers her mouth with his.

It’s a blunt, tangled kiss that comes together from odd angles, her leaning back against the counter 
half-way against him without their bodies actually touching, his arms splayed unevenly on each 
side of her like he’s caging her or needs the support or both.

Yet this is exactly what she’s been waiting for, the moment when he boils over and proves that yes, 
he does have these urges in spite of his trying to act otherwise; that he’s not made of stone and he 
does still want her as the ways he’s acted before have indicated. She places a hand against his 
stomach, a hint of softness over iron, and rather enjoys the route she charts around his side while 
enthusiastically reciprocating.

She first takes his lip between her teeth when her fingertips make contact with the cool brush of 
metal at his back, then bites just enough that it pulls when he tries to drag his head back and she 
doesn’t let him. He lets out raw a noise against her, then whips his hand from the counter behind 
himself to clench her wrist in a grip so tight she breaks into a pained gasp that releases him.
Lightening the pressure and slowly moving her thieving fingers away from the prize, he reaches with his other arm to take the ‘key’ that’s causing all the trouble, bringing it between them to regard pensively before lifting his eyes to hers.

Her stomach kicks like a mule when he tosses it across the room, then with singularly resolved intention cups his hands around her face and holds her in place as he moves back in to kiss her again. She lets him uncork that carefully bottled desire, drinking it like a vintage wine – though there’s one thing that could be improved upon.

She puts her hands to the counter and in a moment where their lips twist apart to let a sliver of space come between them, picks herself up and hops onto the edge, adjusting their levels to a more acceptable balance. He comes back in without concern, not missing the way he settles between her legs as he keeps his hands to her and feeds back into a string of kisses he’s not yet finished with.

This has to be the right order of things, she settles in her mind as his tongue probes hers, fingers almost laced together around the back of her neck and thumbs in the hollows behind her ears, cradling her head like she could go limp and stay exactly where she is. She hooks an ankle around his leg and pulls him closer to the counter, fists balling in his shirt as she draws his body against hers and wonders if maybe he couldn’t find somewhere else for his hands, on reflection. One of them will need to start touching her intimately if they carry on like this much longer, and she’d much rather it wasn’t her.

Yet he draws back when she’s not far away from outright wrapping her legs around him, changing angles so his forehead presses against hers like a lever to push their mouths apart.

“What are you trying to do to me?” he breathes, and the line could be hers with a few minor modifications – what am I trying to get you to do to me? Her grip stays tight in his shirt, the pressure between them no lighter.

“My?” she echoes in false outrage. “You threw the spoon away.” The quick movement he makes like he’s backing away from her is soon put out of the question, ankles like hooks pulling back against the teasing flex of his weight. He’s heavy, not too big but dense, and she recalls what it’s like having that weight on her with renewed interest. “Tell me,” she asks. “How is it you’ll throw it out of reach to carry on like this but won’t let me take it?”

“Thought you wanted me to stop going easy on you?” he comments, seeming to regain composure in spite of her legs practically locked around him, lingering touches as he relinquishes his hold on her and drops hands one by one to rest on the counter either side of her.

“I’m not contesting that,” she replies, leaning back to put more of than a breath between them and checking the view he makes standing between her legs; it’s just fine. “Merely pointing out the hypocrisy in your approach.”

“Because I know what’s good for me,” he delivers like he’s being torn in half, “but I’m no good at doing it.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” she quips; for a man unpractised in well-on a decade he’s stacking up just fine – though no one else she’s engaged with made getting to this point anywhere near as difficult. More than happy to oblige her any way she desired, in fact. One in an array of factors that set him apart from her other affairs, age and gender being some of the more obvious.

“Stay there,” he orders with a filthy streak of command in his tone, but she lets it go this time, remaining perched on the counter and permitting him to fetch the spoon off the floor and return the ‘key’ to its place on the back of his hip.
“Don’t tell me you’re still going to insist on my stealing that wretched thing to spend the night downstairs?” she suggests incredulously. Not after this, surely.

“It was your challenge, highness,” he retorts, sneaking the nickname out as he goes back to the knife abandoned on the counter and resumes skinning garlic cloves. “And yes,” he latches on the end. “Moreso than ever.”

“Why?” she shoots, increasingly concerned that she might actually lose and be obligated to stop asking, not to mention a little put out that he’s gone back to what he was doing before her. It doesn’t seem likely she’s going to find a way to get it from him between now and the end of dinner, and the concept of a night in her bed alone is particularly unappealing in lieu of recent activities.

“Because I know what happens,” he offers in a dangerous murmur, and she crosses one leg over the other, taking a calming breath that has little to no effect.

“Speak for yourself,” she retorts primly. “I’ve barely had a restful night in that inhospitable drying cupboard you call a room upstairs, perhaps I would simply like a decent night’s sleep for once.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” he slurs with a quick glance over at her, still perched on the counter within arm’s reach. “That’s why I need you upstairs.” Even though such an insinuation does something hot and a little sick to her stomach, she maintains an admirable face of indifference.

“You lack of self-control is no concern of-” she starts to huff, but no sooner are the words out than he’s lunging for her in a way that is wholly different to the amorous atmosphere of before – he’s still holding the knife, for one. She’s in a ridiculous position, admittedly, legs crossed over the counter snipping at him about challenges while they’re still running, and ends up resorting to planting a foot in the middle of his chest, bracing her back against the wall as she holds him off. Her leg is longer – and stronger, just – than his arm.

“You can’t talk your way out of this one,” he mutters. She can feel his heart thumping in his chest, and he doesn’t look all too bad underneath her foot all things considered, though they’re hardly the circumstances she’d choose. It was perhaps asking for trouble to pick on his self-control, she notes, given it seems to overrule every organic instinct he has most of the time; if she tries to bait him he knocks over the boat.

“I don’t recall there being all that much talking to it,” she replies daringly, because it’s not her he’s really fighting here, but some part of himself that even her boldest advances can’t override – yet.

“Your challenge still stands,” he says sternly, “– but,” The rumbling of his voice resonates from his chest against her foot, rolling out of him as he grants her a sole concession, “I’ll give you one more day.”

She sighs, and – testing the limits of his tolerance, especially with the knife in his hand that he just tried to go for her with – shoves him back with a dismissive kick.

That he lets her is one of the most interesting reactions yet, taking it as if she can’t move him only with his express consent. Although the look he gives her doesn’t suggest he’s missed the liberty she’s indulging in, so she sweetens a little as she sets her leg back in its original place.

“I better make it count.”
Chapter End Notes

I officially refuse to apologise for any of the foot related jokes or play on words that occurred in this update. I actually took one OUT (about the games still being afoot no less) so you should count yourselves lucky you got off so lightly this time.
“May I access the library?”

Emily leans against the doorway of the walled garden after tracking Daud down first thing in the morning, a pot of coffee still steaming back on the terrace as she observes him on his knees in the dirt, a glimmer of silver at his back as he palms the ruddy earth around his precious vegetables.

“Finished already?” he remarks, glancing over a shoulder at her.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she answers curtly. It was an utterly twisted night, really, but ever the professional she doesn’t let it show. Much.

Reading is claimed to be conducive to sleep, but instead she simply finished the volume Daud entrusted to her, chronicling just a few months in the life of Dunwall’s most prolific assassin; precisely laid out narratives of what could with hindsight be identified as the beginnings of a political culling at the sunset of her grandfather’s reign that only continued as her mother’s rose.

She doesn’t dare mention what did defuse the ratcheted-up tension that an evening with him left her stewing in; how a man with such a history could cross her thoughts at an untimely point with a hand in an unseemly place hardly bears thinking about under the harsh light of day, except that in the depths of the night something had to happen lest she keep winding until she snapped.

Yet it wasn’t the man he was that her thoughts tended towards, so preserved in the pages she’d devoured, but the one she’s spent these weeks with; for whom trying not to be what he once was defines who he is now. The Daud she looks on today is no more the assassin who’d ended her mother’s life than she is the child who’d tried to shove and scream her way into undoing what can’t
be undone – which is somewhat, but not entirely. Just pieces of themselves that fit together along different sides of the same break.

“Emily?” he calls, shaking her out of a daze that she chalks up to not having had any coffee yet. She looks at him expectantly, only for him to come out with, “I said it’s not locked.”

“Oh,” she replies awkwardly, eyes widening as she realises her distraction. “Well,” she fumbles, grasping for reasons to draw him out of the ditch he’s practically digging himself into, “how do I find what I’m looking for?”

The look he gives her is loaded in ways that only become apparent after he asks, “Do you really need me for that?”

“It… would be preferable,” she answers stiltedly, and with a rather overdramatic sigh he puts his hands to the earth and gets up, plodding over and then stopping a solid two paces before her.

“After you,” he invites with a gesture like he’s ever been known for his manners, and her mouth twists unpleasantly at the denied opportunity. Though the library is ‘unlocked’ the bedroom remains so, and there’s the matter of a spoon hanging from his belt that she’s one more day to make a move on.

“Fine,” she remarks frostily, and swears she hears him scoff as she whips around and leads the way. It’s disconcerting to have him walking behind her, knowing it makes her vulnerable but more importantly taking the key – spoon, metaphor, whatever – impossible.

She supposes that’s why he insists on doing it, stopping when she does and meeting the look she lobbies over her shoulder with an expectant patience before she carries on. He even waits at the foot of the stairs as she collects the finished volume from her room, watching her come back down with his back against the wall and a haze to his eyes that makes her wonder why he doesn’t just give in already.

They resume the mute procession down the hallway, and she pushes open the door to his room like it’s really that easy. Sunlight filters through the shuttered windows of the space that spans the width of the house, stretching toward bookshelves as she takes in the sight with renewed appreciation for every way it’s superior to the stuffy rooms upstairs. She resolves yet again that regardless of what Daud thinks will or won’t happen if she should be allowed to sleep down here, there are a host of perfectly decent reasons that it would be an improvement on her existing situation.

“What do you want?” he asks so unexpectedly that she realises she’s been drifting off again – would’ve been dead twice already had he chosen either moment to strike – and as if that’s not a question she can hardly begin to answer.

“Something… different,” she states vaguely, not really operating at full capacity.

“Different how?” he probes, holding out an empty hand for the book in hers without further indication. She passes it over and then watches him cross the room, light glancing off the wretched spoon as he sets the object back in its place.

“I know about Dunwall,” she thinks out loud. “It’s practically all I’ve ever known.”

“Hm,” he murmurs, arms crossed and head tilted slightly back as he stares up the shelves. “Then try this,” he announces, taking something from a higher one and throwing it across the room to her, far rougher with such delicate bindings than she’d dare to be. It occurs to her that the value to him
may have been in the writing, and preservation thereafter is merely a matter of habit. She turns it over – 1819 (3), then looks back up at him. “I travelled more in the early years,” he explains without prompt. “Had recently returned to the city after time away, and business took me farther afield.”

“Away doing what?” she presses, having already taken stock of the four-year gap in his so-called records and puzzled it more times than she cares to count.

“That’s a different book,” he replies as she slowly approaches the shelves in his wake – each step a different opportunity to move or be moved on, though none come to fruition. She sets the volume he offered her on the corner of the desk for further consideration while he looks at her sideways, the scarred half of his face obscured and more striking in profile than she’s ever taken the time to appreciate before now. “Which do you want?”

“What about this one?” she poses, reaching to rest a fingertip on one she’s thought about more than any others. It’s almost surprising he even brought himself to name it *The Outsider*, as nothing he’s said of the deity makes her think they’re on fond terms.

“Let that one be,” he issues stonily. “Nought good in it.”

“Then why did you write it?” she asserts, tilting the volume forward by the spine and swearing a chill runs up her arm. Like it knows.

“Exorcism,” he answers in a low tone.

“You do realise,” she begins aloofly, “that such mysticism only stokes my curiosity further?”

“Then you don’t know what’s good for you,” he remarks threateningly, but she remains composed in the face of such resistance; she knows what to do with hypocrites.

“Doesn’t that make two of us?” she remarks, finger still in place against the book as he drives a look straight through her.

A moment whispers past them that she catches wind of just as he seizes it. She changes her grip quickly, snatching the book by the corner and ripping it from the shelf as he uses the very gifts he swears her off of to apparate so close he’s practically on top of her. Flinging her arm weighted with the book behind her, she drags her heels back a step but can’t do so fast enough – not for him – and unbalances herself throwing the counterweight out of reach as he grabs for it, toppling inexorably backwards.

It might have been an opportunity to snatch the key with her other hand, if not necessary for the purposes of staying off the floor to hook it around the back of his neck, hanging off him like a ship from a crane when she finally jolts to a stop. He’s stepped a leg between hers, fingers just brushing the heart of her wrist as she keeps the book barely out of his grasp, his other hand on the desk for support as she swings off him like a trapeze artist, looking like he’d drop her if it was up to him.

“Tell me,” she says, straight as a board underneath him and suddenly burdened with a question that she has to know the answer to. “Have I even come close to beating you?” He stretches the rest of the way to gently take the book from her hands, setting her back upright like reeling in a winch.

“All your victories are your own,” he issues in words dealt as carefully as a moneylender’s coins, turning the contested volume in his hands and setting it back on the shelf.

“How?” she challenges; it’s not that she doubts her own ability so much as knowing the true extent of his – or so she thinks, at least. With all that she’s learned, the idea that she could’ve even gotten
close to besting him seems impossible, yet instances come to mind that he must remember too.

“I’ve made some…” he pauses, thoughtful at the end of her arm, not yet detached from his neck – why should she, she would facetiously question, “misjudgements.”

He and she both.

It’s strange to remember him as he was when she first arrived, the laughably churlish front he put up to keep her away from him – out of guilt, she supposes, or perhaps just forgotten social skills. She offers a bold smile and glances down at his waist, though doesn’t move on such an obviously inopportune moment, merely reminds him that she’s aware of the goal.

“You may make more yet.”

Like the slip of machine parts in motion, the habit of a meal together settles from one to two, an extra cog that starts turning when she notices Daud ferrying food from the garden into the kitchen. Rather than follow him inside, she catches him through the window, outside looking in as he slices bulbous tomatoes against the counter. The afternoon sunlight illuminates him through the frame, cut with her shadow as she positions herself in front of it, resting her arms on top of one another along the sill.

“Lunch?” she queries like she doesn’t know perfectly well what it is, but he nevertheless makes a plain affirmative noise over the methodical chop of his knife, slicing the core out of wedges of tomato and tossing the waste over her head. “Can I help?”

“Do you want to, or are you just bored?” he asks with a smarting hint that somehow makes her smile; the amusement of being anticipated rather than indignation.

“It can be both,” she answers coyly, reminded of the time she spent trying to sneak into the tower kitchens to ‘help’ the staff with their work, before the discouragement of her entourage and some wild story lured her onto a new fancy.

“Then you can run along and pick some fruit,” he suggests amenably enough not to be outright insulting, though it’s not quite what she was after – being sent away from him and her goal, which are more or less the same thing.

“Fruit?” she queries. “What kind?”

“Whatever you want to eat,” he returns evenly, eyes flicking temporarily up at her from his hands.

“Think you can handle that without me?” It’s evident that he can push her buttons almost as well as she’s catalogued his when so disposed, but she’s not in the mood for a squabble so maintains her amused grin.

“I shall endeavour to try,” she ripostes, and sees the corner of his mouth lift into a smile without looking up; it’s somehow almost as rewarding as when he buckles into the physical intimacy she knows he wants but won’t allow himself to have.

She sets off into the grounds to fulfil the task that isn’t quite what she wanted, but after the fuss she made of needing him to take a book off a shelf lets it slide on this occasion. The volume he did end up giving her is dedicated to the ‘Troubles’ in Morley, set within the years outside of his formal records and reads more like a memoir than anything else; a young Daud – perhaps even her age by approximate mathematics – swept up in an uneasy conflict that only just escapes the label of war in
the chronicles of history.

She wanders the grounds collecting fruit that she plucks fresh from their branches, even some dreaded peaches, before coming back to find him roasting vegetables over charcoal.

“You can wash and cut those too,” he instructs before she’s even across the room towards him, and with a huff that he only casts a knowing glance at her for, she goes back out to continue helping from a distance.

Lunch is not a particularly extravagant affair, though she still sets the table and concedes into changing out of her nightclothes – if only into the dress that she’s getting slowly more accustomed to wearing, and certainly doesn’t dissuade his eyes from following her around any less.

Escaping the thankless sun for the shade of the terrace, they dine on fresh bread and vegetables dressed in an alarmingly spicy oil – Serkonians and their taste for heat, she despairs before shifting herself urgently off the contemplation of Daud’s tongue in any regard.

“I’ve been wondering,” she remarks, head resting thoughtfully in her hand as she stares across the table at him, no need for awkwardness or an excuse to start a line of questioning anymore. “You said to me once you’ve fought in unjust wars. Did you mean this business in Morley?”

“Amongst others,” he answers reservedly.

“Yet you fought for no side,” she points out, yet to finish the account but having already read him swap sides and then back again as the situation suits – changing his stripes to match the tone of the places he needed to get. Why he needed to reach these places lies within another book, she suspects..

“You could equally say that I fought for both,” he flips around like a piece of sport.

From what she’s read so far it’s more mercenary work than his usual fare, with the occasional incident that harks to the precise, mechanical ‘trade’ he’d later make a thriving business out of in Dunwall. A recent entry she’s come across details the gruesome demise of a wildly popular and charismatic leader; a martyr of the long-running insurgency following the Uprising at the turn of the century, whose death fuelled the movement for years to come and is long remembered in the landscape of Morley’s fierce national pride… yet she’s just learned the history is wrong.

Framed as murder by enemies to their cause, Daud’s account alone tells that the conspiracy came from within their own ranks. How a rival cut a deal with him to orchestrate the ‘tragic loss’ of their leader in exchange for a handsome sum and safe passage to a far-flung outcrop under the resistance’s control, then swept into control in wake of such catastrophe. History intent on repeating itself, if she didn’t know any better.

“Lies perpetrated about your actions fuelled the conflict for years to come,” she points out. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Who would believe a turncoat?” he remarks easily, and unfortunately isn’t wrong. “Or would you like to tell the people of Morley their heroes tore each other apart like dogs fighting over the same scrap of meat?”

“Aren’t you the dog in that metaphor?” she pits. A vicious force to be pointed in a direction and set off to rip a bloody trail.

“If you like,” he murmurs darkly. She doesn’t, and is tempted to ask even now how he could do the things he has; not just the cold-blooded transaction of murder for coin, but tangible chaos
wrought by his hands and mistruth that came thereafter.

Yet as if he’s truly programmed her to think like him, she knows without needing to be told that if not him it would’ve been someone else. That death can be bought and made from hands other than his. It goes without saying that her Capital is not dramatically safer for his absence – if it were only that easy.

“Did you truly have no allegiance?” she asks instead. “Or is that spoiling the end of the book?” His prose is distressingly readable, so she doubts it will take her very long to finish.

“They each had their beliefs,” he answers evenly, not seeming sure whether he’s smirking or scowling as she roots around in his past like a trawling vessel, “and each the point where they became willing to act against the interests of the people they claimed to serve for the sake of those beliefs.”

“That bothers you, doesn’t it?” she presses astutely, narrowing her eyes across the table as she continues trying to solve him like an equation.

“It should bother you too, Empress,” he jabs like a curse.

“There are times when a people must suffer for a cause,” she replies stiffly. Goodness knows she’d inflicted enough misery on hers; whale oil rationing, quarantines and travel bans to name a few – to say nothing of the punishments levied for violating such unpopular policies, lest they be disregarded.

“Who decides?” he retorts. “You with your education, high up in the Tower?”

“Not just me,” she snaps. “There are advisors, and the Parliament-”

“And who are they?” he comes back rudely. “What do they know of the suffering that must be inflicted, yet are so rarely affected by?”

“Then what would you have?” she returns. “Anarchy?” Isn’t that all there is? She can imagine him saying, but he pauses, thoughtful instead.

“Give those whose sacrifice is required a chance to speak for themselves,” he issues carefully. “You may be surprised by how well they understand what must be done, or how profoundly those that claim to speak for them do not.” He pauses, sloshing a bottle of oil packed with what she recognises as dozens of dried chillies over a soft paste of vegetables he’s layered onto bread. “And don’t trust politicians,” he finishes gruffly, taking an undignified bite that leaves a smear of something in the corner of his mouth; he would be a horror in high society, she believes without a shadow of a doubt. Not least because she knows he can be better, but chooses not to.

“That much I know already,” she quips, a smile somehow twisting its way across her face in spite of the fact that he’s just eviscerated her entire cabinet and means of rule at large. “Perhaps I should appoint you as one of my advisors,” she jests – though it makes a rather intriguing picture.

“My sole recommendation would be to dismiss anyone who holds such a superfluous title,” he retorts, apparently still ignorant of the fleck of food hanging in the lines around his mouth.

“Why, so you can have me entirely to yourself?” she starts it like a joke, but by the time the line is finished it feels like she has said something glaringly, terribly conspicuous. His stony gaze conveys as much.

“Offering practically uninformed commentary is not a trade,” he offers with careful detachment,
sweeping a crust around his plate soaking up oil. “Seek out those who have experience of a field to draw knowledge from.”

“Ah, such as being an assassin?” she poses wryly.

“Better an assassin than a quack,” he rebuts, and she can’t resist a chuckle.

“I’ll bear that in mind,” she replies mildly – perhaps overly so, given how she might have reacted to such harsh commentary from him a short while ago. Today she simply resumes resting her face on the ball of her hand, watching him finish eating without ever dislodging the morsel that would mortify a person in polite company. Not that he’ll ever have it, she supposes. “Coffee?” she offers rather than asks – another lesson she’s picked up without formal inclusion in the programme.

“Hm,” he grunts affirmatively, so she rises from the table, strolling into the kitchen to set up the pot with his gaze following her like she’s got his eyes on a string.

He’s on his feet when she comes back outside, plates in both hands to clear the table, but still that ridiculous piece of – she’s not even sure what – hanging from a bristly crevice of his face.

“Wait,” she says with a sigh as he almost passes her by, stopping him with a light touch on his arm before raising the hand to his jaw, “you have something here.”

She recognises the moment just as it lands, and like following a single ripple on perfectly flat water, moves her other hand unassumingly behind him as she wipes his cheek with her thumb, securing her grip on the handle of the infamous ‘key’ as she looks up at him with a perfectly innocent smile. He’s focused on her, yes, but on the hand fussing at his face like there’s any precedent for such interaction between them, and not the one that plies the spoon from its place on his back.

The whole thing happens so quickly that she’s swiped him clean and stepped back before the moment drags on any longer than it needs to be, carefully palming the ‘key’ as she steps aside to let him carry on into the kitchen, conscious effort not to seem too obvious as she holds it loosely inside her hand.

She can hardly believe when he walks away, watching his back disappear through the door bereft of the fixture the piece of cutlery has made on it for the past day and a half. She lets out a monumental sigh as soon as he’s out of sight, practically staggering to the table and staring at the tarnished spoon in her hand like the most miraculous thing she’s ever beheld. Slumping onto the bench, she turns it over in her fingers like she needs to check that it’s real.

He doesn’t come back out until the coffee is done, a couple of cups that he sets down on the table ordinarily as anything while she keeps her victory concealed under misleadingly relaxed fingers. She takes a calculated sip, and then like there’s nothing remarkable about it in the slightest puts her cup back down and starts to idly stir, metal clanking against metal as she repositions her chin against her hand. It draws his attention immediately, and she watches the quick succession of the deepening creases around his eyes then the hand that he folds behind his back – nothing there, of course.

“Oh,” he says, face completely wiped of anything except purest surprise.

She can’t tell what she’s most pleased with – the victory, or the shift in his expression as she replies, “Oh indeed.”
It was only when I recently edited this chapter that it occurred to me exactly how much it might dead a bunch of people, so... if you're dead. Sorry. Ish.

In my background research I saw Morley is inspired by Ireland (and Scotland to some extent) and the 'Uprising' matches up with the fight for Irish independence, so I figured why not borrow the infamously named 'Troubles' into this world's history too? Allllways more politics with these two (shoutout to alazywhaler who I know loves their Discourse). The whole conversation kind of sprung out of the ether at the time of writing because I needed some mealtime filler-talk, but I'm terribly fond of it and there will be long-lasting impacts to these little chats they have XD

I've also got a 'Daud timeline' that informs all the dates cited here, sketched out from the scraps given in the game, which mostly rely on one note that states he appears in Dunwall at one point, did a *whole bunch* of murder then vanished for a while, travelling around and purportedly spending a term at the academy of natural philosophy before eventually showing back up to become the Knife of Dunwall proper. We know he's born in 1795 and info stated he got snatched from Serkonos at around 16, so by my timeline he does a few years 'pre-Knife' in Dunwall then travels from the age of about 19 until coming back to Dunwall around 1818, making him 23 at the time of his return. I can assure anyone who's wondering that this is *extremely* important to me, and I have a glorious M$ paint timeline with all this stuff in it, as well as a record of the passage of time in the story itself - this is the 22nd day Emily's been there making it just a smidge over 3 weeks they've been, uh... 'together'.

It's definitely been a wild ride seeing comments come in about how good this story is starting to hurt (I know, I know), and all I can really say is... it's been *super* fun to write, and is only getting *moreso*. 
The Forty-First Lesson

Chapter Summary

Even with the battle already won, Daud’s only making things harder.

Chapter Notes

*Blows the whistle on the trash ship* Good afternoon everyone, welcome aboard this week's leg of the trash ship cruise. The Captain believes this is a particularly fine stretch of seas we're approaching, and hopes that y'all will enjoy the ride.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This had seemed like a perfectly good idea... at the time, Emily reminds herself time and again over the course of an afternoon.

There are a catalogue of reasons why she’d worked so hard to get Daud to allow her to pass the night in the room and bed of her choosing. However, after astonishing them both by actually pulling it off the air between them had become so thick it was as if a smog had engulfed the whole house. One that blocked up tongues from even acknowledging the victory and what it meant, even though they both knew well enough.

He didn’t congratulate her on the inadmissibly excellent job she’d done, but like receding tide pulled away to his work around the ground, not a word spoken of the deal they’d made – which she’d been led to believe he wanted at least as much as he didn’t. She obstinately took to reading and assigned responsibility for her unsettled stomach to the afternoon coffee.

Yet it’s almost as if they’d become strangers again; especially when come the evening she finds him at the kitchen table half-way through his meal – didn’t even wait for her. It’s a move that almost hurts if she isn’t too proud to be anything but dismissive of such indirect avoidance of the issues and her – same thing, in fact.

If not for the book she peruses while eating in starkly uncomfortable silence – the chronicle has reached Daud’s fifth flip between sides as he traversed Morley at the height of troubles he had a not insignificant role in exacerbating – then it’s almost as if the past weeks haven’t even happened. In spite of merely doing what she was challenged to do, at her own suggestion albeit, it feels like any understanding they’ve reached has been dashed like a ship against rocks.

However, not a shred of that will induce her to do anything except what she’s won fair and square, so come the end of the day she brings herself to his door almost wishing that the spoon really had been a key. Some physical barrier that she could confront and solve, rather than wrestling with uncertainty and doubt as she stands in front of his closed door with only her nightclothes and nerves.

She frowns at herself and then starts pushing it open, stopping part-way as she considers what she might find on the other side.
“Daud?” she inquires, fingers hanging over the edge as he’d once done in a reversal of this situation, which seems unusual to have come before the one that faces them now if she thinks about it. She tries not to.

“What?” comes a coarse grunt from within, and she continues through to discover him hunched over the desk, back very firmly to her. She can’t see what he’s doing at first, drifting a few paces into the room feeling exactly like she ought not to be there. It’s different in the dark, only a lamp on the window sill casting off the silver in his hair and throwing ominous shadows across the floor at her.

“I… can leave, if you want,” she ends up blurting to her own surprise. She’s barely set foot inside and is already outright offering to retreat. She still wants what she wants, but not like this.

“Not on my account,” he replies distantly, face turned down to the desk. “We made a deal.” That he will honour regardless of his feelings about it, she fears.

“I know,” she says, “I simply mean…” she hardly knows what she’s even trying to say, except that it’s not worth it if this is how things are going to be. She’d rather sweat upstairs and still have him act warm towards her. “I don’t want to impose.” She hears him scoff.

“The time for that is long past,” he replies surely, and idling closer she sees that he’s hunched over repairing some kind of knife; parts he may have waited half a year to procure if her guesswork is any good.

“Yes, but,” she offers, hesitating when he stops and looks around at her. Peers over a small pair of eyeglasses pinched on the bridge of his nose that she’s somehow surprised to find on his face, though it makes sense – at his age.

“You can leave, if you want,” he echoes calmly, a careful but deliberate twist on her words that is wholly sincere – and she’s almost tempted to. Even if it’s the last thing she’d admit to him.

“Of course not,” she demurs. “This is what I wanted.” It doesn’t even sound convincing to her.

“Hm,” he murmurs, the addition of the pince-nez completing the professorly air to uncanny effect, and then turns back to the desk. She creeps over to the armchair that she was denied before and settles into it without protest, book tucked in her lap like a cat.

Staring at the square stretch of his back, she wonders how it’s even come to this. Her… fixation with unravelling and contradicting him at the same time probably isn’t healthy, but even now she basks in his presence, this world he’s built around himself to keep out the one he wants nothing more to do with. It can’t be helped that she wants to know more about this creature who ruined his own life long before doing so to hers; ensure he’s the last of his kind, if such a thing is even possible.

He finishes with the knife, evident when he holds it up and tests the repairs in a hand just visible beyond the edge of his shoulder from her position in the chair. It’s a folding blade of an unusual kind, two handles that spin deftly around his fingers with a flash of metal flying between them that never seems to catch up. As quickly as they whirl around like something more alive than an object, the weapon comes to a rapid stop, the edge standing out assuredly as sharp as he keeps all others, and then with another fluid movement he flips it away, two polished bone handles sitting in his palm concealing the blade within.

He sets it down followed by the eyeglasses, and as methodically as a mechanical device himself, picks up the lamp and paces over to her, setting it on a low table by her hand. So she can read, of
course. His consideration even now bites like metal in the depths of winter.

“Goodnight,” he says roughly over her, and she looks up with disarmed surprise.

“Already?” she remarks, noticing the indentations on either side of his nose from the glasses. “But… it’s so early.” The weakest point she could make, but valid nonetheless.

“Perhaps for you,” he replies firmly, and she recalls how seldom she’s known him to wake after her, so supposes it makes sense – and what would she demand from him, to sit by her feet and keep her company like a pet?

“Oh,” she remarks instead, feeling like there’s a canyon miles wide separating them. However, though the cooling air between them isn’t any comfort, the breeze through the room achieves a more practical effect and is more tolerable than upstairs – just. “Then I suppose I shall… be along later.”

That is if she doesn’t opt to fall asleep in this chair, like he has rather than challenge her for occupation of his bed. Times she thought nothing of such an invasion, oblivious as she’d been to anything that was happening between them.

“Hm,” he hums unreadably, straightening up and striding out of sight as he crosses the room towards the bed. A rustle of fabric sends a jolt to her gut, which she presumes to be his shirt’s removal, followed by tell-tale creaks of wood and the shuffling of a body coming to rest.

She hears him sigh, and then silence – almost, bar the whisper pull of his breath from across the room. She questions which makes her a worse person; retreating to her room a coward whose nerve failed at the last minute, or following through with a plan – the justifications for which seem astonishingly trite upon reflection – and sharing a bed with the man who killed her mother?

She does neither for now, and simply opens her book by lamplight.

Emily finally retires when she is too tired to read anymore, Daud’s cursive swimming on the page and needing to be shut away as she presses fingertips over tired eyes.

Her reasoning is without flaw, she reminds herself as she picks up the lamp and slowly crosses the room – even this is something she’s willing to face in the hopes of a more restful night. Because comfortable sleep, she reiterates once more, is what she really wants, and her nightmares have always been lessened by the presence of another, though it’s untested whether the effect will apply when her company is their prime source.

In Dunwall she’s been somewhat restricted in the company she can smuggle into different bolt-holes about the tower, but not so here, where the only thing stopping her from climbing into bed with a seasoned killer is herself – though it’s still a significant barrier to overcome. At the very least he appears to be asleep already, an uneven shape turned towards the wall the furniture stands against, bare expanse of back criss-crossed with scars that almost seem to shift in the light as she stands at his bedside as if holding a vigil. Like she could find that curious folding knife and turn it on him now if she wanted to – though doubts he would make it that easy, even if she had the inclination that’s so notably lacking.

While generous enough for one, the furniture certainly isn’t made for two – not that he’s making much use of it huddled halfway under a simple sheet facing away from her. The only clearer message would be if he’d actually constructed a wall down the middle of the mattress.
She sighs and finds it has little effect on settling her nerves, an undefinable mix of trepidation about sharing a bed with any man – something long-prevented in an environment as closed as Dunwall Tower, doubly so with her father for a Lord Protector – and moreover that it is him she’s even contemplating any of this with. She’s not sure which rattles her more, but when she can’t possibly stand there any longer finally puts the lamp down and blows it out, then as carefully as setting herself in her own tomb sits down onto the edge of the bed.

She doesn’t know what he’s so concerned about for this resistance to be so dramatic – she doesn’t want to be here for an explicit purpose, barring that he would deny her and it’s an improvement on her existing arrangement. Nothing has to happen between them, and it hardly needs saying that they’d both need to be compliant anyway – besides which, the implications of that nature were all his in the first place.

She considers then, listening to the gentle waves of his breath like tranquil seas, that it must be himself he’s more scared of, though she hardly expects him to initiate anything now. If it’s been like pulling teeth the rest of the time then being in a bed together shouldn’t make any difference, she reasons infallibly. He doesn’t stir when she lies down, and it’s still an improvement on her room in temperature if nothing else – which may well prove to be the case – bar a slight inkling of warmth that she perhaps just imagines from his body.

However, never a restful sort, sleep doesn’t prove to come easily to her and she tosses and turns without managing to get comfortable, the negative space between her and Daud’s backs an unnavigable pass. If he wasn’t awake before he may well be now, with the way she’s flipping like a fish out of water. She also rather wishes she’d brought a pillow, as the only one between them is at least half underneath his head, and the proximity that she needs to attain in order to share it slightly the wrong side of comfort.

She soon ascertains that there isn’t enough space to be on her back and rest her head in a human fashion without touching him, which in spite of having won her permission to be here in an even contest feels unquestionably off-limits. Lying on one side puts her face into the arch of his neck in a way that’s entirely too distracting even if there isn’t nearly enough space for her arms, so the only remotely feasible option is laying on the other back to back with him, letting the space of his body pour against hers like a waterfall.

However, she’s entirely too unsettled to simply pick one position to sleep in and stay there, so continues fidgeting until she finally bolts upright in an eruption of frustration. Moving so suddenly that she feels him twitch – a convenient ruse of slumber he’s got going – she gets up to storm across the room in the dark and walks into the door more than she does out of it on her first attempt.

She’d blown out the lanterns in the hallway, foolishly thinking that she wouldn’t need them again. Something she regrets while blindly groping her way up the narrow, uneven steps and fumbling her way into her room, breathing the same stifling hot air that the cross-breeze through Daud’s quarters mitigates so well. It doesn’t matter, as she’s not planning to stay long.

He is proven to have moved since she left, because when she strides impertinently back to the bed and slings down the pillow she almost broke her neck falling down the stairs to fetch, it makes a sound – he makes a sound – of surprise that suggests he thought her retreat was for good, spread out from the wall he’d made of himself.

“No such luck,” she says acridly into the dark, eyes adjusted enough to able to pick out vague shapes that stop her actively tripping over herself or walking into walls anymore, though nothing beyond the shadowy mound that she takes to be him.
It’s only when she carefully finds the edge of the bed and sits down that she hears him drowsily say, “Wouldn’t call it that,” followed by a shuffling that she takes to be him turning away from her.

She lays down to find an unusual shape in the pillow she’d just gone to such lengths to retrieve, so reaches disgruntledly under it only to wrap her hand around warm skin; part of an arm attached to the rest of a body that’s on its back next to her rather than put up to her like battlements.

“Sorry,” he mumbles in a way that seems semi-conscious, making to move until she pushes down on him, keeping his forearm where it is like baby teeth for fairytale creatures to collect.

“Don’t,” she says insistently – don’t be sorry or move, it doesn’t really matter, because either way he stays. She stretches and settles regardless, the shape of his arm under the pillow unobjectionable now she knows what it is, and finally gets comfortable enough to fall sleep.

She wakes an indeterminate amount of time facing the exact opposite of the way she was, as rather than having her back to him – like at least one of them has to be shutting the other out – she’s an arm resting against Daud as if it’s the most natural thing in the world.

She gives an experimental shuffle and he doesn’t stir, but upon tentatively moving a knee to rest over his leg he shifts suddenly enough to make her gasp, thinking she’s pushed it too far. Except he just sighs peacefully then adjusts his arm under the pillow and her neck both, curving round her to rest a broad hand over the back of her shoulder like it’s nothing at all. She doesn’t know how awake he even is – neither is she much, for that matter – but it’s shockingly pleasant. The comfort of being held regardless of all other circumstance, so she pulls herself closer, leg following to rest further across him.

Challenge the nightmares to come for her with their maker’s arm wrapped around her, she thinks groggily before dropping back into sleep.

The next time Emily wakes is less peaceful; she’s sprawled even further over Daud, who lies immovably under her like a slab of bedrock, but due in no small part to the combined effect of their body heat is entirely and distressingly too hot.

She turns over and finds the nightshirt she’s wearing intent on rucking up around her, not to mention the position afforded by laying on her other side far inferior to the propping of a body underneath her – truth be told it’s a scarce handful of times she’s been able to pass an entire night with someone in this way, and in those cases actually sleeping was never a high priority. Nor was wearing clothes, for that matter.

Rather than thrash around anymore and establish herself as ungracious a bedfellow as houseguest, she follows a straightforward line of reasoning about the source of her discomfort and sits up with her hands already crossed over the bottom of her shirt, whipping it off in a clean movement and tossing it aside as she lays back down. He’s sleeping, she reasons – as will she be again soon – so hardly thinks about it as she settles with just enough space between her torso and his for sweat-prickly skin to breathe.

However, it’s not long before she realises hand is running up her back. Lazy fingertips trail a meandering path across her skin seeming more out of curiosity than anything else, like he’s searching for clothing that simply isn’t there, but they’re definitely not the actions of someone who’s firmly asleep. She draws in a breath, pressing down over the patch of his torso where her arm has been at rest, and feels the speeding of his heart as he rouses even further. His palm flattens
to pull her experimentally against him, the press of skin on skin making a stark difference all of a sudden.

She can imagine him not believing her claim that she hadn’t meant the act of stripping off so carelessly like *that*, and he’s sleeping shirtless in the first place so must know better than anyone the purpose it serves, though none of that quite seems relevant now. So instead of jumping to the defence of anything, she just fits herself more firmly against his side, trailing her palm down from his chest to stomach and marvelling at how easy it all is.

They’d been physically close long before he ever dared to kiss her; chemistry that’s allowed her to insinuate herself so surely around him in this state. Because even now, being wrapped around him, *topless*, is somehow natural in a way that by all rational means shouldn’t be but inarguably *is*. An innate quality to the contact that makes it the last thing it should ever feel – comforting.

She’s no longer properly aligned with her own head, so adjusts and shuffles her face closer to his torso, moving away from the comfort of the pillow to lay her cheek against the warm plane of his shoulder. By the time she’s done that his hand has reached the back of her neck and slipped under her hair; he sweeps it mercifully to one side and the caress of cool air sends a shiver down her spine. Encroaching even further into his space, she only realises when her nose bumps against his that he’s also turned into her.

The exact balance of how much pressure his arm exerts behind her against how far she pulls herself toward him is impossible to divine, save that it takes very little effort before their mouths are pressed together.

And while she still hates when he’s right, this time may be the least objectionable yet.

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Chapter End Notes

Uhhhhhyah.

Now I make no promises nor make no direct requests, but I would definitely note that encouragement/haranguing of myself (comments and tumblr is also fine) might sway me into prepping & releasing the next chapter a little early, as it's an idea I have been toying with for... reasons that are to do with the nature and content of it. *Gestures at the tags* If I'm struck with the time/disposition (latter much helped by hearing from y'all) I'll see what I can do, but there'll be a chapter as always next week regardless.

I couldn't resist Daud + glasses, though it's a pince-nez just to be finicky. It's also a butterfly knife (balisong in the Philippines) he's playing with because let's be real by this point I'm throwing in with everything I've got. At 120k I've come to accept that anyone still reading's gotta be pretty on board with what I'm selling, so it's trash buffets for breakfast, lunch and dinner from here on out.
Because the Night

Chapter Summary

You know what it is.

Chapter Notes

So as promised I got hype enough to make a 'bonus' of this chapter on the heels of the last one - there will still be a new update on Friday, as we've got all *kinds* of things to get through.

If the summary wasn't warning enough, this is an adult content chapter, y'all, so don't read if you're not prepared or okay with that. I figure if you're 120k deep into this ridiculous controversial rarepair slow-burn, you probably are though. But this is the official SPICY warning.

This chapter isn't named a lesson as part of an initial concept to try and keep the smut separate from the rest of the story (part of why I felt like making it a 'bonus' and it's also a Bruce Springsteen song that I listened to an awful lot in the writing). However, it's very evident now that's not gonna work, so henceforth SPICY warnings indicate there will be some frisky business going on. On which note-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This, Emily can acknowledge, is likely exactly what Daud was talking about when he said he 'knows what happens' if she slept in his bed. Because although they made it a decent amount of time without anything coming of it, what's going on now is quite undeniably real.

He kisses her lazily, lips tracing over hers before drawing back in the warm air as the heat between them invalidates any salvation in temperature that she might've once pointed to as a reason for being where she is. There are different reasons now, like how she can run her hand across his chest and drag herself further over him like she's beaching on a sand bank.

His own hand remains affixed to the back of her neck, the other alighting just above her elbow as she twists around him. He follows her motions rather than guiding them as he falls increasingly underneath her, only the rise and fall of his chest as his breath deepens between each indulgent kiss.

She's halfway there already, but there's a definitive moment when she pushes her leg from crooked over him to land on the other side, hips following as she slides fully on top of him. The hand that had been perched gently over her arm now sits loosely around her leg instead, still nothing much in the way of space between them as their mouths come apart and then fall back together like breaking waves, every sound they make stark against the silence enfolding them.
‘Do as I say and not as we did’ has been her father’s motto as far as affairs that could produce the heir everyone else in the Empire seems so desperate for went, so past scattered interactions it’s been considerably easier to carry on with her own sex over the years. Not that there are any complaints from her on that. However, her experience with the opposite is at least enough to know what to expect when her weight settles over him, reading the tightening of his hand around her leg and messy break of his mouth from hers.

So while it’s certainly not the first time she’s been in this position; unsupervised, topless, straddling a person whose mouth she’s becoming rapidly familiar with the interior of, he’s so unlike anyone she’s gotten this close to before that it hardly makes for comparison. Not just for the traits of his sex, stubble that scrapes if she moves the wrong way against his face – not convinced she’s a fan – and pressure underneath her as she sits on him with a few meagre layers of clothing between them.

Not even that he’s an age and a half older than her, or how his hands delivered the actions that tore her world half-way apart; factors that don’t affect the tantalising way his tongue strokes overs hers in the present. He’s reserved even now, not leading the way as she’s come to expect from anyone lucky enough to get into such a position with her but taking what’s offered in his same ambling pace, like nothing – not even this – could hurry him. So in spite of how much it satisfies her to feel him assert, to need, it’s still her impatience that drives them forward, a hand around his jaw as she dives back in and kisses him harder.

He reciprocates, but like a boat coasting over the swell of deep waves in a storm. She wants to sweep him away, rip out the docks and watch him lose the land, yet he’s frustratingly steady, even the hand that rises slowly up the front of her thigh almost calculated in its expedition. So she takes the one nestled around the back of her neck and pulls it down to her chest, breast filling his palm and something runs through him to promise that he, like anyone else, can be undone.

His hands are terribly warm, a light breeze the only salvation against the closeness of sweat and skin, then when his fingers flex into soft flesh she’s not entirely convinced she isn’t drowning faster than he is. She breaks off him with a gasp, pressing her weight into his ever-present support as she heaves a deep breath.

“This is why I didn’t want you in my bed,” he murmurs, shattering the notion that it could be anyone else she has underneath her; not with that voice, the resignation dragged out over jagged tones like eviscerating something to die. She tightens her hips and presses down over him, a grinding pressure that cannot mistake what she feels.

“This is you not wanting something?” she asks smugly, delighted by the wheeze that comes out of him like punctured bellows, and even moreso by the threatening murmur before the hand on her leg moves to take an almost sharp grip on her hip.

“Didn’t say that,” he rasps back, then is kissing her again, kneading fingers like she’s clay in his hands. She nips his lower lip in return, fingers finding the spot between his neck and shoulder that they’re inevitably drawn to and digging into it like throwing down an anchor. He’s getting warmer underneath her, she’s sure, and the pressure between them just keeps building.

She’s a hand flat against his chest, different from the playgrounds of soft curves she’s more accustomed to, but raking her nails across coarse hair and scar tissue and feeling him shudder is desperately pleasing so makes a fine alternative. He’s getting along well enough with sandpaper fingertips that he trails carefully around the sensitive skin of her chest, but the others, still clamped tensely around her hip – though not inhibiting any movement on her part – could do more.

“Do I have to move your other hand too?” she says against him, and this thumb sweeps in an arc along the hollow where her leg runs into the rest of her body.
“No, highness,” he replies with a wry hint that she’d reprimand him for if the next moment he hadn’t shifted it exactly where she wants, letting out an appreciative gasp as she lifts on her knees to make more space for his hand under her. He can call her that – or anything else for that matter – as much as he likes, provided he keeps touching her.

She rests on an arm propped next to his head, pushing against him or even guiding fingers with her own, soon operating around the pitiable remaining nightclothes between them. She prefers co-opting someone than doing this herself if she can help it, and often doesn’t have to do anything at all; willingness to please hasn’t traditionally been a problem with her partners, though she suspects it’s a symptom of Daud’s issue rather than the primary condition. Something that may have been alleviated, given he’s now more than compliant in providing whatever she needs – at last.

With a coil of tension that’s been winding since before she even knew what it was, it doesn’t take all that much to spring, but even after she’s shaken off release knows that it’s not nearly enough, especially with the potential yet to be explored as she settles back over him. He’s not made of stone, for all his efforts to indicate otherwise, and knowing how much he wants her is at least as important as her own satisfaction – at least, it is now.

She runs her hand down his chest without stopping, and while it’s not quite the first time she’s felt a man in this state, it’s certainly the first in a while. His train of thought may be running the same way, because his fingers close loosely around her wrist when she reaches for his waistband, no longer content with barriers between them – not sure she’s ever been – to stop her before she subverts it.

“Wait,” he murmurs, rising from the back of his throat like bubbles in swamp. “Have you-?” Leaves it hanging like he doesn’t dare make the admission for fear of acknowledging that it’s even a possibility.

“Of course,” she answers, continuing the way she was going with fingers reaching for too hot skin under cloying fabric as he writhes under her, finally giving the reactions she’s been thirsting for. “Though… not with a man,” she reveals on impulse, and he makes a tortured groaning sound that doesn’t seem to know what it’s meant to be.

“Emily,” he breaks, “I can’t be the one to-”

“Don’t trouble yourself with me,” she asserts, closing her fingers in an experimental grip. “I’m merely curious.” He shifts again, flexing back into the bed as she learns his shape and thoroughly enjoying the effect it’s having on him.

Her hand soon strains awkwardly under the clothing she has a hard time believing he sleeps in most of the time, suspecting that if not for her presence he’d be naked and her exploration much unhindered. This strenuous need to restrain himself is finally overwhelmed, walls assuredly brought down and invitation given when he reaches with a tortured sound to unceremoniously drag his waistband lower, then with her willing assistance shoves trousers the rest of the way off.

No sooner is it done than his hand closes surely around hers, around him, and moves indicatively, feeling him arch into the movement as she continues with the guidance. She suspects he’d never be so candid in the light of day, hardly believing he’s permitted her this far if not evidenced in her grasp right now. Though she knows the anatomy well enough and has found means to conduct some investigations before, it’s always different in the heat of the moment. She sort of wishes she had a little more light to see what she’s dealing with.

In time, she thinks right before realising that for as much talk of the programme or outright denial of the rest of the world that’s waiting for her, time is one thing she doesn’t have. Then she’s sliding
out of her remaining clothing before she even knows it – not that they’d made much inconvenience earlier – fuelled by an urgency that she can’t quite place as she throws a leg back over him.

“Em,” he gets as far as; whether he was even going to finish debatable, but he stops all the same when she folds over him, hands to his face in absence of being able to see where his mouth is before she puts hers on it. He kisses her like he could drink from her lips, a hand roaming of its own volition to clasp one of her breasts and squeezing, but he stills when she moves against him in stark demonstration of the fact that she’s still on top of him but they’re now both inescapably naked.

“Just a little,” she says what will have to serve as persuasively, pre-empting any excuses he might have been working around to issuing about the flush of skin on skin as she slides along the length of him and lowers a hand between them.

“You sure?” bleeds out of him, head pressing into the pillow as she sits up and holds him in place to probe curiously. Though admittedly a little inexperienced with these specifics, she’s isn’t so untested not to know what she’s trying to do; hardly a virgin, after all.

“I told you not to worry about me,” she mumbles with only half a mind on what she’s saying, the rest dedicated to the sensation of firm flesh pushing against her as she inches onto him.

“You were saying?” she taunts, assured by now that this is the only thing that’ll slake her craving. She has to subsume him, like he’s hers to use and do with as she desires.

“Take it slow,” is all he clips in response, and she stops instinctively, suspecting that he’s speaking for both their parts. His hands come to her thighs in a tense grip that only fuels her intent to see this through. Nothing had to happen, she reminds herself, but that never meant it couldn’t.

It’s the most responsive he’s ever been to her, because even unable to see much she can feel how restless he is as she toys with working him inside her. It’s a different kind of hard to what she’s had before, but has only her own resistance to overcome – much helped by wetness she was aware of long before he even touched her, body knowing before brain in this case.

She might have been the last person to accept this could happen, even as she charts the way.

There’s no measure for the power of incapacitation it gives her over him, hands flighty up her legs and skimming around her waist and chest like an animal that can’t settle. This is surely what he was so wary of, but he’s certainly not objecting. Is even the noisier out of them in a rare reversal of their usual dynamic, no words but an orchestra’s set of sounds as she undoes him like loosening boots to get the fit right.

His hands are on her waist when she finally stops with no further to go – an interesting interpretation of ‘a little’ that neither of them have deigned to comment on – and then his grip tightens, fixing her in place for an experimental flex.

“You all right?” he asks as she makes a surprised noise with the movement in her. She moves hands splayed across his stomach up his chest, changing the balance of her weight as she leans onto him, feeling his heartbeat drumming under her palm.

“Do that again,” she requests, huskier than she’s expecting out of herself, and a gravelly groan is
her answer as he carefully repeats the motion, conjuring a sound that she hopes he’ll recognise as a good kind of moan.

Putting more weight against the slab of his chest, she goes tentatively through a movement of her own – such as when they were still at least semi-clothed – and finds the effect just as enthralling, breath shuddering out of her as he makes a similarly desperate noise. She repeats it, grinding slowly into a rhythm, nails digging into his skin as she rides the waves it pushes through her, chasing the storm until his hands tighten on her hips and still her.

“Easy,” he says hoarsely, chest heaving, and she knows from tone it’s his own sake he’s speaking for, especially when he adds, “It’s been a while.” A gross understatement if she’s ever heard one, but she slows acquiescingly.

Stretching over him like stringing a bow, she sets elbows to the pillows either side of his head and leans over as she finds a new range of motion to explore, moving up in a way that enables her to sink back down. Perhaps it’s not quite what he meant by ‘easy’, but the sounds coming from him don’t seem anything like complaint so she carries on, gasping appreciatively when he lifts a hand to cup a breast, the other spreading into a firm grip of her rear.

He’s somewhere between guiding and following as she rocks over him, balance tipping further towards the former when his jaw scrapes against her chest – a positioning too convenient not to take advantage of – and she gives a strangled murmur of enthusiasm as he mouths one breast after the other.

He claims even more of the control flowing indescribably between them when powerful arms stop her moving, holding her in place as his knees start to lift behind her. Something she’s about to query until his hips snap up and into her, driving a completely undignified moan out of her as she falls further over him, his mouth moving higher up her body to let out warm breath against the curve of her shoulder.

“Still all right?” he checks, and she just nods against his neck; a little sore, but nothing that’d deter her from staying right where she is, pushing her fingers behind the back of his neck to hold onto him like perhaps she’s not all of the storm alone.

“Don’t stop,” she says into him, so he doesn’t, arms wrapped around her lower body to keep her in place over him as he moves into her with a carefully restrained rhythm. He’s too slow, really, but when she pushes her weight down on him just as his comes up it hits something that rings another cry out of her like striking a bell – she’s used to having to be quiet, but there’s no one in the world to hear them here, and it seems to have quite the effect on him, going by the change of pace such vocalisation evokes.

It’s intense for all kinds of reasons, her only comfort the belief that he’s not holding up any better than she is, hands clenching tighter around her and a timed meeting at the apex of each thrust unravelling any recollection about who is doing what to who. She just buries her face against hot skin, finding that spot at the junction of his neck with her mouth and even biting down as she rides him like surf. Clenches hard enough that he stops with a ragged gasp, leaving her panting over the mark she’s left in him, wondering how they ended up here. Opposing currents turned into a whirlpool driven on its own power.

“Relax,” he says, putting his temple to hers with a soothing purr that she almost resents; how he could dare to sound at all put together right now. This appearance lessens when she feels him looking for her mouth with his, adjusting to the static feeling of him inside her as their lips come together. The heat of his mouth is like something not of this world as he kisses her in a way she wishes he’d done since the beginning; even knowing the time it’s taken them to get here hasn’t
been without reason, or she wouldn’t have responded then the way she does now.

They’re warm enough that excessive skin to skin contact isn’t entirely practical, so when he starts moving again she braces herself against the arm he supports her with and stays close without pressing right against him, dipping only her mouth to trail across his jaw, picking up the end of his scar like a rail and following it up the side of his face. Still never to be hurried any faster than he’s decided to proceed, he goes at a pace that’s almost agonising if not so desperately pleasing. She changes the placement of her knees, weight a little further back and altering the angle again, inhaling sharply as it sends a pleasant new jolt through her.

“Like that,” she gasps as the tension ratchets even higher, and he makes a renewed primal noise, fucking up into her as she rocks back on him.

“Breathe,” he murmurs at the moment she needs to hear it, and then, “I’ve got you.” She drags lungfuls of air like surfacing from a dive, fighting the urge to tense and riding out what he does to her with indecent noises that she buries into the pillow and his neck. So much for undoing him, she thinks, draped like a decorative throw with next to no idea how he’s done what he just has to her.

She fortunately gets further opportunity to consider it, because while slowing he doesn’t actually stop, just pauses as she releases and then starts turning back up like a clockwork toy. She breathes noisily, barely stopping herself from wrenching hard enough to shove him out as she’s racked past the point of coherence – of anything except clinging to him and sounding out every mind-numbing shock he pushes through her. It seem gets to him, famous control loosening as the clap of skin coming together speeds up like the inching down of a metronome weight.

“Emily,” he groans, vibrations from his chest like a saw through fresh wood, arms running alongside her thighs with a tight handhold of her ass. “I’m—”

It’s all the warning she has before being unceremoniously lifted off him, aware that he’s no longer inside her at the same time as she is a hand formerly gripping her is now wrapped around himself, still close enough to detect the motion as he spills over himself in the dark – at least he was thinking about that, no such considerations even crossing her mind.

The quiet is overpowering, folded around them like thick blankets, only shaking breaths that fall like waves breaking along the shore.

“Sorry,” he murmurs under her as if finishing his sentence, and manners seem ill-placed now.

“What for?” she dares to ask, and can hardly stand when his unoccupied hand comes flush with her cheek. This might be the first time she’s no desire for his remorse, which his answer overflows with regardless.

“Everything.”

No, she thinks, an apology the last thing she wants on his lips at this moment.

She sets her hand over his in the terrible silence that follows, but it’s not until they’re lying down once more – his arm resting over her with its innately reassuring weight, front to her back – that she dares let slip a fragile whisper of, “Don’t be.”
Ohhhhhhh boy. That eventual smut tag went up for a reason, so hope I didn't disappoint ;)

I had it very much in mind to try and capture that 'nothing has to happen and yet-' slow evolution of being in bed with someone without the explicit expectation of hooking up only for it to end up happening by merit of fooling around escalating until you're like 'oh, right'. I could genuinely write an essay about the nuances and literary aspects of sex scenes, but will restrain myself save that it should be trusted that all the details like who's where and doing what to who (and how) is absolutely chosen for specific reasons.

I also may have warned people before, but I'm a gratuitous, dedicated and heavily smut-based writer, so all this buildup and background has been stage-setting for the fireworks show that is very much planned to take place going forward. Because I'm not done, no, no not even NEARLY.

And *finally* I get to mention my headcanons for Emily's sexual orientation and experience - it's gotta be that pansexual but largely-hooked-up-with-ladies-thus-far Empress for me (also poly as hell *cough cough*). Hopefully it's evident enough in the chapter, but this isn't to imply she's never been penetrated, for lack of a better word. Just not with a certain part of anatomy ;) So although this story happens to be m/f shipping, it's between demi- and pan-sexual characters who aren't any less of what they are for it. Plus I'm weak for that 'hasn't had sex in well over 10 years' vs 'hasn't had this *kind* of sex before' dynamics in a crazy real way. Woo sexuality spectrum.

Anyway that's enough of that, see y'all on Friday!
Chapter Summary

Emily is perfectly at home in the heat of the moment. Daud, less so.

Chapter Notes

Alas, we drift further and further away from the 'lessons' matching up with where the chapters are actually at, but oh well.

Reading the reactions (and writing the occasional 8 point essay about the literary subtext of a smut scene) for last chapter has been a really genuine pleasure, so thanks to everyone who turned out to yell at me about how FINALLY they DID it at long last. I know, I know, It *has* been 125k so I guess y'all have earned a little pay-off.

Now the challenge is to keep that tension ball rolling - I've certainly given it a good try with this update, so hopefully have pulled it off.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emily wakes alone, twisted in Daud’s sheet like a model for a lurid painting and aching from the earth-shaking events of the night in more ways than she cares to count. Getting carried away is an understatement of such magnitude it hardly makes sense to even call it that; a hurricane that’d swept them fathoms from the nearest bit of sense seems more appropriate.

Yet she stretches with guilty satisfaction. There was the man she’s been demanding to meet, she thinks with a delightful tingle; the one who can’t help himself around her, who in spite of all the reservations and rules he tries to hold himself to will actually let go and be the raw, wanting creature that he seems intent on keeping from her.

“Daud?” she calls from the empty room, rolling onto her front and attempting to peer all the way along the length of the house through the open bedroom door. She thinks he’s in the kitchen, though without the stifling temperature of her room as a measure of time is lost as to where he’s supposed to be in his daily routine.

She hears him before she sees him, sandals flapping as he appears at the far end of the corridor and walks slowly along it towards her. Each pace he lays down seems ever-so slightly more threatening than the one before it, a wildcat prowl that stirs her in innumerable ways. He steps out of the shoes at the threshold of his door and approaches the rest of the way on silent feet, a desperately serious expression on his face that she hopes is at least somewhat precipitated by the picture she makes dressed in his sheets and nothing else.

He’s wearing different trousers to yesterday’s, which are now in need of washing after becoming a sacrifice to cleaning up in the depths of the night. These aren’t so loose, ending half-way down his calves and cut from the same raw-linen cream as his shirt, possessed of another of those low-hanging collars that she’s sure is far less stifling than what she’s used to and still greatly envies.
She gazes around for where he keeps all these desirable things, only to get distracted by his mute arrival at her – his, technically – bedside.

She bristles under his gaze, meeting the stone cold look he drops onto her with baited interest, not revealing too much herself – he’s not the only one who can pare back what he shows in his face, and she wants see what he’s going to do.

“Made yourself at home, I see,” he comments like pouring dregs out of a wine cask. She rolls from her front onto her back as modestly as anyone under just a sheet can be and inspects him with a keen eye. He doesn’t look any different – no scars added or taken away in the throes of the night. Perhaps he walks a little stiffer, but it could just as well be her imagination.

She thinks about smart lines that might bring a smile to that steely countenance, but decides instead to hold out a hand to him in invitation, which has a more dramatic impact by far.

“I’m busy,” he says in a low tone, and she restrains herself from rolling her eyes only because it’d detract from the serious look she’s boring into him. He can’t do this again – show himself to her under the cover of darkness and then retreat like he was never there.

“Not so busy you couldn’t come in here, but too busy to get into bed?” she phrases, and a twist in his lip could be a scowl and smirk at the same time.

“Exactly,” he replies defiantly, and then after a pause like he’s cooking under her gaze. “The bread will burn.”

“Oh the bread,” she parodies, and it must be early in that case. “Then by all means prioritise baking over your Empress.” It’s meant to be facetious, but lands a little uneven, casting a peculiar look across his face as she tries to pull rank, naked, from his bed. Her hand stays where it is, fingers flicking indicatively to beckon him from where he remains resolutely just beyond her reach.

“Is that an order?” he remarks cautiously, eyes on her hand like she’s baited it for a trap.

“Oh course not,” she replies and at least half means it. Besides, he wouldn’t comply if it was.

He doesn’t put his hand in hers, but does let out a sigh that she’d interrogate if not followed by his dropping posture, as he concedes to setting himself down into the space she quickly makes for him in the bed, dipping as his weight sinks the mattress.

She’s a hand on his chest before he’s even at rest, slipping through the opening of his shirt as she drapes herself over him in the reversion she’s been seeking the moment she woke up alone. She wants him how he was after the seal had been broken yesterday, when there was no more reservation and she slept soundly with his arms around her. Running her fingertips under the edge of his collar, she pulls it back and finds a faint mark at the base of his neck. As if she needs to check for the proof, like his heavy-lidded gaze isn’t enough.

“Something you want?” she hears from the echo chamber of his chest, and if that isn’t the pressing question.

“A kiss would be a start,” she remarks easily, skipping nimbly away from answers that she doesn’t have.

“Why?” he asks.

“Do I have to justify myself?” she replies a little tart, though cut with just enough humour to continue, “Should I submit it to you in writing, or would an oral presentation suffice?”
He gives a restrained chuckle, but no sooner are the airy sounds past his lips than she’s balled her hand into a fist around the edge of his collar, and pulls him into her like reeling in a catch of the day. She stops him just before contact, a jolt of his weight against her as he doesn’t anticipate her not finishing the movement. Still isn’t grasping that she wants him to do it.

She thought she understood what those long-burning looks of his meant, except that they’re still happening even when she’s warm and willing against him, when she’s waiting for him to kiss her and he continues to hesitate.

He leans on an elbow beside her, pinning her down with a weighty gaze that she’d rather substitute for the tangible pressure of his body instead of all the implications attached to it, then raises a hand to her face so carefully she could be mistaken for thinking she’s made of glass. Even now she believes it’s not what will happen to her should he make contact that’s so concerning, but what it will do to him.

Setting a single finger against her jaw, with the barest amount of force he turns her face away from him. That his mouth lowers into the space opened up by the movement is decisive in her allowing it, because while not quite what she was going for it’s still a kiss he lays against her, light scrape of stubble and his lips pressing over the soft hollow tucked between her ear and jaw.

That’ll do, is her first thought, morphing into better when he picks up only enough to trace across desperately sensitive skin and alights further down her neck. Closing her eyes and stretching into him with a relieved sigh, his hand lowers and fingertips dance across her collarbone, remaining safely above the border of his sheet tucked across her chest – for now, at least.

He sinks further down her like a tide washing out, palming the underside of a breast over the bedsheets. She’s unused to anyone taking so agonisingly long to fawn over such unremarkable parts of her, but his mouth is hot against her collarbone and the chafing of his stubble not entirely without merit, so she’s not of a mind to hurry him along just yet. Although when his fingers tuck over the top of the sheet and pull it away she fills her chest with a noisy inhale of anticipation all the same.

Opening her eyes a crack as he charts a straight line down her breastbone, she takes in the picture he makes; the sharp hairline and quarter of his scar visible as he moves his face around her like a cartographer of her body.

More used to keeping her voice down for fear of being heard with company providing such a unique service to their Empress, she huffs gaspy sounds of appreciation as he thoroughly maps her contours, wet of his mouth cooling in the morning air. However, and keeping in mind the effect that her noisier moments had on him last night – or vice-versa for that matter – this natural instinct is overridden when he finally takes a nipple between his lips, tongue sweeping around her as she makes an animal noise she can hardly stand to lay claim to.

He gives a thoughtful murmur at the development, and with careful investigation raises his hand to her other breast, grabbing it whole before rolling her other nipple between his fingers. She lets out another drawn-out noise and presses her thighs against each other, arching up into him with her hands balling and unballing in the bedding as he unpicks her like a line of stitching.

“On the subject of things I want,” she remarks when she’s the faculty to speak again, addressing him in a tone soaked in as much arousal as she is.

“Shit,” he croaks, first sound that constitutes an actual word out of his mouth in a while, and even then she’s not convinced at first, only becoming sure when he follows it with, “The bread.”
“The bread?” she exclaims, further appalled when he pulls away from her as easily as throwing back a sheet and rushes out of the room, apparently ignorant of leaving her behind worked up like a well kneaded dough.

Frustrated in ways she can hardly verbalise, Emily waits for Daud to return and pick up where they left off only to find that he doesn’t, so has to concede to actually getting out of bed – a shame, given how delightfully comfortable it is – if she’s to get satisfaction of any kind.

She finds some small portion in the chest of his belongings she raids to procure one of the light summery shirts that she’s so long envied. It’s even looser on her than him, hanging to the top, just, of her legs so biliously that she knots a length of the cord around her waist lest it fill with air like a hot balloon and simply float off.

There’s further satisfaction to be had in the overbrowned crust of the bread that’s cooling on the kitchen table with an end sawn off it, which crackles under her teeth with a thick layer of peach preserve on top. She can almost taste his distraction in it, though he appears to have all but fled now, or so it feels – a bitterness subtly undercutting the flavours in a less than savoury way.

Refusing outright to chase him, she finishes a more bitter yet pot of coffee and attempts to read, though finds it too irritating to pretend at for long. It’s not long before she’s so relentlessly bored that she takes a shower simply for something to do, hamstrung between her stubbornness not to seek him out and his reluctance in the other direction, so is in the hammock trimming her nails with a knife when he next appears some hours later.

He looks rather hot and bothered all things considered – though in entirely the wrong way – and paces straight past her into the kitchen without more than a cursory look, an outrage so great that she’s already gotten up to go after him when she remembers she was trying not to follow him like a dog after its master. She finds him drinking the better part of a jug of water, damp patches showing up darker on the back of his shirt where he sweats enough to soak the fabric through.

“The harvest would be a cruel mistress to you today,” she comments archly from the door - one she’s fighting herself not to be outright jealous of - and he turns to look cagily over his shoulder at her. “If I didn’t know better, I would think you’re avoiding me,” she adds like a jape, even though it isn’t really.

“Told you I was busy,” he grunts before turning back, setting down his cup and pouring water over his hands to splash over his face, running palms through his hair and down the back of his neck.

“That’s why I know better,” she replies humourlessly. “Even so, I’m a little bored.” ‘Little’ meaning about what it had last night, in this case.

“Is going through my things not entertainment enough for you?” he rasps without much fondness in his tone, but at least he’s noticing, she barters with herself.

“I was only looking for something to wear,” she says a touch defensively.

“So you helped yourself to what’s mine,” he slurs like it actually bothers him. She hadn’t asked, true, but it’s only a shirt for goodness sake – and further to the point, could be removed.

“What are you going to do?” she asserts combatively, pacing over to the counter and leaning against it with one hip. “Take it off me?” It comes out sounding somewhere between a question and a request. About five different things happen in his expression at the same time, though the
culminating action is to shift a stony shoulder around and come to face her fully.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” he poses like it’s an intrigue of some kind. She looks away from him, recalling instead the man who could hardly keep her name – or the rest of her for that matter – off his lips last night. Can’t understand why this one just stands there staring at her like he doesn’t know what to do next.

“You wouldn’t?” she returns, looking back up at him as she worries a finger along the groove she carved in the countertop with her dagger during one of their many fights – this one when she’d played at seducing him without realising she already had, and he threw her off like an attack dog.

She almost can’t believe he has the audacity to sigh at her comment, but that it’s succeeded by him reaching a heavy hand out to cover her other hip, sliding her in front of him as carefully as assembling clockwork, is enough to keep her mutely interested.

“What do you want?” he asks, hanging her on one of those whaling hooks of a gaze as she squares in front of him with the counter at her back, his arms on either side of her with what feels like miles of space between them.

“Do you really need to ask?” she retorts, and he leans in but misses her face, moving past her to her ear.

“As long as you continue to avoid answering,” he murmurs into it, and after being pushed half way up to the edge earlier today already she’s just about ready to climb the rest of the way herself if he doesn’t lend a hand soon.

“You could finish what you started earlier,” she suggests, pleased when his hands close in tandem around her hips. She draws a sharp breath as he unhesitatingly lifts her up and set her on the counter, yet the next thing he does with his mouth still isn’t what she wants.

“I’ll rephrase,” he announces as his hands come to rest over her legs like carefully balanced weights. “Why?”

“Why what?” she baits, being deliberately obtuse because amongst other things, she doesn’t have the first notion of how to put any of it into words; save that she quite definitely wants more of what she had last night, and doesn’t see how or why he’s quibbling with her now when it’s so clear that he wants it too.

“You know very well,” he breathes over her mouth before his head tilts into hers and then pauses just before contact, seizing the moment she’s about to strain into him like snaring a rabbit. “Ah ah,” he reprimands, pulling back as she leans in to catch the ungainly proof of the matter – that maybe she wants to be kissed just as much as he wants to do it. “I asked you a question.” he goads like a teacher putting her on the spot, though there’s a rather different frustration his patronising drawl works her up to today.

“Why do you have to know?” she throws out in exasperation, because even she doesn’t really know, and all of this seems assuredly beside the point.

“Why don’t you want to answer?” he returns on more turbulent winds.

She decides to take a leaf out of his book and coasts around the shape of his face to land her mouth next to his ear. However, rather than speaking into it she just takes the tip of her tongue around the edge, and his hands clench around her legs, a breath pressing out of him like she’s working a music box.
“Emily,” he issues as a warning and maybe even something of a plea. She feels him hitch again when she moves further to dig her teeth into an earlobe that she wonders about the look of heavy with jewellery, noticing distinctive scarring that runs up the cartilage.

“Maybe I like making you weak,” she murmurs into the shell of the ear she abuses, and he stills, a controlled rise and fall of his chest.

She finally gets fed up and tugs him closer to her by the shirt, shifting her hips forward to press against him on the edge of the counter. Except no sooner has she made contact than he’s pulling away from her, a firm backward step and rush of air against where he was.

“You’re too used to getting people to do what you want, highness,” he delivers with the courtesy of an executioner, leaving her perched on edges both literal and figurative as he walks away.

Chapter End Notes

*whispers to self* don't say it *repeats louder* don't you fuckin' say it... *says it anyway*

I really like this chapter too.

I'm also 100,000% about a young Daud wearing a bunch of metal in his ears because. That's all.
Chapter Summary

Backing Daud into a corner isn’t wise, but what choice does he leave her with?

Chapter Notes

Goshdangit everyone, 45 chapters (including the un-numbered ones), 130k... what are y'all even *doing* here still?

Oh right, trash ship.

This one gets SPICY, you have been warned.

Emily isn’t sure whether she wants to fight or fuck, to put it crudely. Perhaps some combination of the two could be arranged, though in spite of everything that happened last night she seems unable to get Daud to even kiss her today, content as he is to work her up and simply walk away.

She retreats sullenly to his room – fat chance of her being driven back into her own tinder box – in the early afternoon, with no sign of him over lunch in a clear shift from the progress they’d been making. She doesn’t understand why he’s pulling away from her like this isn’t something he wants too. The things that’ve happened between them wouldn’t have if he didn’t want her; that’s if his looks and willingness to start what he won’t finish by the light of day weren’t enough to go on already.

It’s from the sulky comforts of his armchair that she catches her eye on something else that’s been denied to her – the only book on the shelves he’s discouraged her from reading. What better time, she thinks spitefully as she gets up and snatches the spine labelled The Outsider from the bookcase, settling back into the chair as she begins flipping through the pages.

Rather than his recognisable handwriting, the early section is full of drawings; a great number of maps, including several of Morley that start to make sense of the bizarre route he took around the land in the other material she’s been parsing, as well as sketches of what must be shrines, symbols and other shapes that she imagines would send any Abbey man into a wild frenzy.

The first section of writing she finds is scored in a precise hand for him, so she can only imagine the care and control with which he must have laid the letters down.

The first Outsider was a boy named Eóin.

Cast out from the primitive community that bore such an inauspicious child without claim, he lived on the outside long before the Void took interest. Some sources report that a band of occult
worshippers took him for affinity with it, others that it whispered directly to him like a madness, urging him alone to build the first shrines and carve runes into bone – his own if no other could be found. The truth most likely exists somewhere between, like the half-made creature himself, existing in the space between all the things that are.

What's certain is that human was merged with the other by means of a crudely sharpened flint dragged across his throat. The entry wound is still there, unhealed. Remains regardless of the necks that have been more cleanly slit since. Others all resembling that same outcast who knew the coldness of being on the outside long before becoming it.

Tales tell that the first vessel returned to those who had ostracised him and tore apart the ones who had condemned him to such a fate, feeding the scraps to whales before being pulled into the void he’s doomed to occupy. Save the circumstances that allow crossing back into the world he was half-made in, communication takes place between-

“What are you doing?”

She jumps, so transfixed in reading that she didn’t notice Daud come in, looming over the back of the chair with a thunderous expression.

“What does it look like?” she retorts, jealously pulling the book closer to her lap.

“I told you to leave that be,” he says ominously, seeming sure at once of what she’s cradling in spite of the indiscriminate lines of text that he shouldn’t be able to make out at this distance. Perhaps he’s noticed the space on the shelf; a world so carefully arranged that a single gap in a bookcase tells him everything he needs to know.

“Don’t I usually do the opposite of what you say?” she turns back pettily, and the shift in the undercurrent of their interactions is desperately apparent. “I was curious.”

“Curiosity isn’t enough of a reason to invite yourself into others’ business,” he says stiffly.

“You told me I could read your journals,” she reminds vindictively. “Aren’t they the truth, after all?”

“Not that one,” he warns darkly.

“It all seems rather factual to me,” she remarks. “For heresy, of course.” A gimmick, because she doesn’t have the father she does without drifting from the Abbey’s notions of good religious discipline.

“Don’t play with me on this, Emily,” he has the audacity to warn, perhaps even threaten.

“Play with you?” she echoes incredulously, snapping the book shut with a decisive thunk. “You’re hardly one to talk, Game-master General.” Astonishingly, he seems surprised by the comment.

“What game would that be?” he’s bold enough to inquire, so she sets the object aside and stands up, drawing herself up to her full height – below him, but not by that much.

“The one where you pretend you don’t want me.” She throws a fighting look his way as she issues her final sentence. “I know you do.”

“Do you now?” he murmurs softly, eyeing her like the spinning knife she’d watched him wrapping around his fingers yesterday, rightfully wary as she gives the conversation an ugly shove into such raw territory.
“Yes,” she asserts, and with a twisted smirk elaborates, “A thing or two from last night certainly gave me the impression.” He looks harrowed by the comment, but still hungering like a man without an invitation to the table – even though it’s solidly not the case. “So why don’t you drop this nonsense and we can get on with it?”

He lifts a crooked eyebrow, but says nothing.

“Then perhaps I need to jog your memory?” she continues with narrowed, assessing eyes, reading his face like pages as she reaches out to lock a hand over her preferred anchorage off the base of his neck. Though it contravenes the policy she’s trying to enforce about which of them initiates, she reels herself in to press a kiss to him all the same.

He doesn’t move until they’re touching, but after a moment of contact she feels the pressure of him leaning into her like releasing a valve – no matter how hard he tries to remain stoic these reactions betray him. One of hand settles tentatively her waist, sinking lower as she opens her mouth in encouraging him to follow suit, and is soon squeezing her behind as they tussle with ever-increasing familiarity.

Putting him to the test, she tenses the arm hooked over his shoulder and lifts a leg, wrapping around his waist and waiting for his support – which he gives – before bringing the other off the floor too, hooking her ankles behind his back as she clings to him like a barnacle.

The tightness in her stomach knots harder when he starts walking them to the bed without stopping anything else that’s happening, careful bending of one knee and then the other until she’s back to the mattress underneath him.

“How time,” she bemoans when his mouth finally leaves hers, but he doesn’t respond, just puts it to her neck and ignites shivers through her body as lip and the scrape of stubble and teeth reclassify her from solid to liquid. She pants under the sure but controlled weight of him on top of her as he undoes enough buttons of his shirt – though not the one he’s wearing – and slips a hand inside to clutch at her breast, closing quickly on her nipple in a pinch that makes her gasp.

For once he’s timely about things, because his other hand is between her legs before she even misses it, professionally expedient removal of the pitiful remaining clothing she’s taken to wearing since the barriers between them came down – so she thought, at least.

He sets himself to her with greater finesse than he ever demonstrated on the strings of the instrument that she spies on the far side of the room, as she lolls her head to one side and relaxes into the release of touch. He remembers this much from last night at least, practised circle of fingertips as he tunes her for the right pitch, a note she’s eager to hit after being twice denied already.

Satisfaction strikes her like pulling several knots free at once, shaking around him with eyes screwed shut as she snatches deep breaths and finally stops his hand with hers. About time indeed; she’s never been so thoroughly teased before, though it’s almost enough to make the wait worthwhile – or might prove to be so as things progress. Except when she twists contently against the coiled up bedding and reaches for him, she finds her hand quickly pinned to the bed under his.

“That’s enough,” he says hoarsely, like she can’t look between them and see the strain against his trousers in a way that surely can’t be comfortable.

“But we’re just getting started,” she counters eagerly.

“No,” he rasps, “we’re not.” He moves away from her, letting go of her hands and sliding back
onto his knees like he’s leaving.

“Wait,” she blurts, sitting up with a worrying sense that things aren’t going to plan. “Why not?”

For all the fine view he makes, kneeling on the bed just beyond her bare legs crooked either side of him, the look he gives her is more worrying than she’s comfortable acknowledging.

“Because I’m not a thing for you to play with until I break,” he utters with a tone like the snap of over-dried charcoal.

“What?” she bolts.

“Not even you,” he murmurs hazily, “Empress.”

“Daud?” she calls right back, actually watches him wince as she says his name. “Is there a… problem?”

“No anymore,” he slurs almost resentfully, “You got yours,” he adds with eyes flicking from her face between her legs and back in a way that almost makes her feel embarrassed, resisting the urge to snap them together – he’s seen everything there is to already. “Now will you leave me be?”

“What?!” it comes out louder and more indignant than she was intending, and sets his expression like stone as he turns away from her. “Daud,” she repeats as he gets up, not even responding to that. “Daud!” she shouts as he walks out of the room, so stunned that for a moment all she does is sit there yelling after him, shocked when he doesn’t come back.

Then she starts seeing red – he’s not making a damn bit of sense, and furthermore seems to think he can just stroll away from her after seeing to her needs like some kind of… it doesn’t bear thinking about. As if this isn’t something he’s offered to her willingly. He’s on the terrace by the time she catches up, which is easily enough to leave her temper somewhere in the kitchen as she storms up behind him with an open shirt flapping around her shoulders.

“Daud!” she thunders, but he whirls around on her with an air that makes her stop and reconsider.

“What, Emily?” he barks like she ought to be scared, if she’d anything left to fear from him. Maybe she’s about to find out if she does. “What do you want now?!”

“I want an explanation!” she rails. “Storming off in the middle of-”

“Of what?” he snarls. “Your curiosity for making me weak?” It’s a surprising enough answer to stun her mute for so long long that the fury knotted through his brows twists into something as hurt as is it angry. “When will it be enough?” he asks hoarsely. “When there’s nothing left of me?”

“I… don’t understand,” she fumbles. “You want this.”

“And what do you want?” he bites. “I’m not something you can chew up and spit out because the taste intrigues you.”

She hardly knows how to respond, tacitly prompting, “What are you talking about?”

“I won’t be used,” he growls, worrying his brow with fingers that were so recently between her legs as if nothing was wrong – nothing is wrong, she insists to herself. “Not anymore. Even by you.”

“Use?” she echoes disbelievingly. “How have you contrived of that?”

“You’ve said as much yourself,” he growls, and she thinks she knows what he refers to – but it was
only an attempt at teasing, though in retrospect clearly ill-advised if this is where it’s landed them.

“That’s… I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Then how did you mean it?” he snaps. “You have to decide what the hell you want from me, Emily, because I can’t keep doing this.” He almost makes it sound like she’s forcing him, a nasty point that sticks in her throat like fishbone.

“I want the same thing I’ve always wanted,” she issues coldly. “For you to be your true self with me.”

“Which is?” he poses; not because he doesn’t know, but because he has to hear it from her.

“A… man who desires me,” she forces from herself, and even with no one around for hundreds of miles it feels risky to say it out loud. “I want to know how much you want me.”

“Why?” he demands.

“Stop asking me that!” she snaps a little childishly even by her own admission. “I don’t have to explain myself to you of all people.” It’s a low blow, but hardly worse than leaving her half-cocked and worked into a carnal fugue over him all day.

“But you’ll take whatever pleases you,” he points out with a look that border on contemptuous. “As and when it pleases you to have it.”

“I apologise if it’s been such a terrible chore pleasing me,” she spits. “I rather thought you were enjoying it too.”

“What do you care if I do?” he throws out, and peculiarly enough the question seems sincere.

“Of… of course,” she stutters before getting it out. “That’s exactly what I want. Your-” she almost says lust and thinks better of it at the last minute, “pleasure.”

He burns her up with a look that’s still all wrong, like a wild animal cornered in a human settlement, desperately out of context and furious without really understanding why.

“If you care for it so much,” he issues in a quiet murmur that’s only a different kind of anger, “then you’d get on your knees.”

“What?” she murmurs, and his face twists into a scowl she’s not seen for some time but remembers the moment she lays eyes on it. The contempt of thinking he’s right about her.

“That’s what I thought.”

“I said what, not no,” she snaps, pulling together the implications like pieces of fabric into a seam. Realising what he’s insinuating, while one part of her bucks against it there’s another that’s almost shamelessly titillated. It’s the latter that speaks when she tells him archly, in almost Imperial tone, “In which case you ought to sit down.”

He doesn’t expect that, she can read from his face as easily as if he’d penned it in his own distinctive handwriting. Yet he still moves suspiciously to the nearest bench and slumps onto it like an emptying freight cart, back to the table and a wary eye that’s cut with something else entirely. It’s not as if he’s been unaffected by all this, as much as he seems intent on overwriting his own desires.
The person she’s been on such a devoted manhunt for is close at hand, she senses as she follows him across the terrace and only stops when his legs are on either side of her. Steel-tipped eyes bore into hers before she cautiously goes down onto her knees, a hand resting on his leg as she drops between them.

“Like this?” she tests, feeling the tension of his thigh under her fingers and looking up at him for a change.

This must be the most dangerous game they’ve played yet, but that has to be the point. He’s pushing her like she has him, trying to make her fit into his expectations like she hasn’t made it her quest to subvert them at every opportunity; because if he wants her subservient, on her knees, to experience his desire for her, then she’ll happily oblige.

“Take down your hair,” he replies bluntly, and the thrill it sends through her is entirely unexpected. She almost asks why, but then it doesn’t really need asking so just reaches behind her head to pry out the clasp, unravelling the coil over on shoulder and keeping her eyes on him.

She can read the conflict in his face too easily, knowing she doesn’t have to do this – that it’d be easier for them both if she stays in the boundaries of what he expects from her; someone used to being served, having things done for and to her without offering anything in return.

Except he won’t stop underestimating her that way, and she can get what she wants from him just as easily like this Especially when she only needs to run her palm flat across the front of his crotch and watch his eyelids wind down like closing shutters, pupils wide inside grayed irises. She reaches for the tie of his belt and pulls it free, hooking her fingers around his waistband as the inside of her wrist draws across the bulge in his clothes.

“Up,” she commands, testing his boundaries for bounce even as she plays at this subjugation, and in a key demonstration of where the balance really lies he lifts to let her pull the clothing off him, bunching it under her knees before the hard stone floor gives them any more grief.

He’s pocked with scars of course, and laced with a dusting of wiry hair that thickens as it goes up. It’s not the first time she’s been quite so close to this anatomy in the broad light of day, but it’s certainly been a few years since the dalliances that left little impression on her.

Her spite to prove him wrong overrides the better part of her nerves as she takes him in a hand, moving carefully with rapt attention to detail. Notes the difference from yesterday’s blind fumbling, where he was rock solid before she ever got her hands round him, but she’ll soon see to that.

The first victory comes in the sound that escapes him when she tightens her grip, pressure rubbing along the inside of her hand as she draws it experimentally all the way up and back down. This is exactly what she wants, she thinks as he firms under her fingers, and there’s nothing that being on her knees really does about which of them is more indisposed to the other: he’s more completely in her power than ever.

Her second victory comes when he’s full and throbbing, as she throws caution even further to the wind and ducks forward to take him in her mouth. He makes a choked sound and his fingers weave through her loose hair, holding her still for a moment – not that she’s likely to go anywhere quickly in this kind of position. It’s different to things she’s done before, but she isn’t so much of stranger that she doesn’t know what to do, moving fingers to her lips and sucking until she hears him groan.

Perfect, she thinks as she pulls back with a smack of her mouth coming off him, and his grip tightens in her hair. As if he isn’t still plenty weak to her just like this.
What she’s a little surprised by is the extent to which she enjoys it, a hot streak running through her when his fingers coax her back onto him without coming to words or excessive force. It’s fortunate he’s too distracted to notice what she does with her other hand, she hopes. It’d be embarrassing somehow to be caught with it between her legs, a little sensitive from his own attention but nothing much to worry about – not when she pushes fingers in time to the bob of her head over him.

Devoted to testing her own limits as well as his, she challenges herself to see how much of this – him – she can take, keeping her jaw forced open as she pushes until he’s thick at the back of her throat and she chokes unexpectedly.

“Fuck,” she hears him rasp, fingers tousling in her hair. “Emily.”

“That’s right,” she gives a satisfactory murmur, pulling back and resting a clammy hand against his leg, knowing that she’s got him where she wants him now.

Except when she glances up at him looking for the gratification, she doesn’t account on him appearing so raw it hurts, like the eyes of an animal being led to slaughter. Is this how he’d looked under the cover of last night’s darkness? So openly wanting, as if she could put a knife to his throat to cut it and he’d let her?

No sooner has eye contact been made than he’s guiding her back in – firmer this time, like he’s asserting that she’s got better things to do with her mouth than remind him how weak he still is – even, or especially like this. She gags again once or twice but doesn’t stop, letting him guide her until his hand leaves her hair, soft touches gone as he grasps himself and jerks fast, preceding her final victory as a stifled groan tears his throat and her mouth is filled.

That all of this has actually happened is a shock which only sinks in as the bitter evidence spills from her lips over even more messily entwined fingers. She moves and looks up to his face fearful for what she’ll see. It’s as she imagined, a stone-clad mask that’s hardened over the disarmed expression of before – how he’ll tolerate being seen by her after she’s made a meal of his vulnerability.

“There’s your damn power trip,” he mutters resentfully. “Happy now?”

It’s only when he says it that she realises how profoundly she isn’t.

Chapter End Notes

This is one of those chapters that I end up reading with a hand over my mouth as I look back over it, because... ugh.... UGH. Goddam.

What, did you think they were going to just start getting *along* all the time now?? Psht. Did you think that would mean they'd *stop* doing sexy things???? PSHHHT. (Things that their motivations are a bit mixed up around why they're doing them, but suffice to say both *want* to do everything they do for each other, just somewhat angstily/spitefully)

Made-up Outsider lore courtesy of me, cuz that's *totally* what everyone's thinking about now, right? ;)

The Forty-Fourth Lesson

Chapter Summary

If Corvo hadn’t been tempted to kill him before, now the fate seems perfectly sealed.

Chapter Notes

Uhhhh SURPRISE! It's time to take another peek behind Daud's curtains, which astonishingly isn't as dirty as it sounds.

Also OTHER SURPRISE, I finally got my lazy ass off my ass and did the thing where I formatted the first 'volume' of this story into ebook formats. Follow the link to access a google drive folder where you should be able to download one or all of the files. Vol 1, just for reference, is chapters 1-28. (https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B7DYc26aMqWia09mRUp2UzU4Q3M)

Comment, message (tumblr or here if they do that) me if you want different formats or these don't work, and happy re-reading?? If I'm organised I'll go and put this link in at the beginning as well, but walk before run, eh?

What better way to round off a week of surprises, I guess, given the E3 drop in which all my dreams were granted by the rendering of the aged-up Daud I've been lovingly building for so long. He does *not* disappoint (also people crying about his hairline or looking too old: that's *exactly* the good shit I'm talking about *drops olive in martini glass*).

Anyway now naughty children it's angst time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daud doesn’t know what in every wretched corner of the void he was thinking, aside that he doesn’t around her. Can hardly control himself anymore, and sure as hell not when she’s slinking around half dressed in his clothes, throwing herself at him like darts to a board.

None of this was meant to happen, but for as much as he hates that she knows it, he’s so weak to her his spine might as well not be there for practical purposes. Like he’d lay on the ground and just let her walk on him if it’s what she wanted. He’ll certainly let her climb in bed with him, get on top of him and will fuck her like it’s not the single most reckless, ill-advised thing to do with the goddam Empress, much less a woman half his age whose mother he put in the ground.

Worse yet, all the resentment and self-loathing he can conjure doesn’t make a single bit of difference when she wants him to throw himself to her like a fox to hounds again; because even when he’s trying desperately to stop her bleeding him out ounce by ounce, he’ll let her get her way regardless. Has since the moment she arrived – it’s just a matter of time.
And for what? To get her revenge with a slow death rather than quick? Hollowing him out like she
has to scrape every last scrap of something human out of him, collecting the final dues on his
innumerable sins.

He puts his face into his hands like prayers he’s never made, elbows to the table as the sun reddens
the sky. She brings out things in him he’d sworn were long lost to the grind of time, but none of
them are good and this latest lapse is by far the worst. Bluffing her like she’d back down, still not
learning that there’s nothing she won’t do to prove him wrong, or to watch him make a helpless
fool of himself torn apart by hypocrisy and lust.

He’d thought it would put her in her place, in some twisted way. A lesson against the presumption
that because she’s had something once she isn’t entitled to it whenever her youth-fuelled libido
desires – because he’s not so foolish to think that this is about more than that. She wants
satisfaction, physical and mental. Loves having power over him, the fact that she can make a
skipping rope of his attempts at restraint, knowing in the heat of the moment he’ll lose himself and
give her anything she wants.

Even on her knees, like that was ever going to help. In the moment it’d felt like – was supposed to
be – pulling her down from that high she was born on; a base way of lashing out because it’s all
he’s ever done for the crime of being used. The cycle he’s still trying to break; how to not be a tool
anymore.

He’s had his fill of being an object for use without emotion.

Yet he’s been a willing one for most of his life, sharpened into the best of the best – acting
consciously and taking the consequences when they come, but an object nonetheless. He’s good
at it, a born natural at delivering what’s required of him in the most efficient way possible – like he
had earlier, thinking somehow if he gave her mechanical satisfaction she might not need to turn his
heart inside out by making him complicit in the act. Again.

He’d fooled himself into thinking it was something he could control his part in, relenting to her
battering ram of persistence only so far, without getting so deeply mired that he lost himself
entirely. Because in spite of everything it’s not as if he doesn’t want to-, doesn’t get all kinds of
sick pleasure from feeling her come against him, watching the twist in such captivating features
with the knowledge that she desires release enough to take it even from his bloodied hands. Except
he can’t stop himself from feeling far, far too much; last night was the proof of how far gone he’ll
be if he mistakes her, this for something real

Because being with her is incredible in any and every sense of the word, but there’s no denying the
worlds between what it must mean to them. He can see the darkness down his road too clearly to be
fool enough to walk it. Or so he’s tried, for all the goddam good it’s done. While he’s aware of the
hypocrisy of letting himself be used and then turning that frustration loose on others like he’s not
made this fate for himself, he’s never known how it could be different. Not since being whisked
away on a ship weeks before his sixteenth birthday. A fine start to a lifetime of exploitation in any
direction it could go, choosing merely how to be used and thinking that was enough.

Only when his fury finally ran out and left him so tired he couldn’t do it anymore – unable to carry
on, rather than making a real decision to stop. Until her, at least. Because she makes him behave
like a young man again, and that’s the worst thing that could happen. He knows without question,
an instinct buried deep in the bottom of his gut, that he’d kill for her in spite of his resolution not to
take any more life – maybe even his own, if she asked it.

Except it’s too much power for anyone to have over him, and the feral instinct in him won’t abide
it.
‘I’ll leave you alone now,’ she said quietly after the latest match of sexual politics was over, finally starting to get it – to realise what happened when a creature such as him is cornered.

‘See that you do,’ he growled back, needing more than wanting to be away from her.

Because even welcoming death, he has and will never go down without a fight; it’s scored into him like carvings on a rune to take whatever he can with him before surrender is permitted. So although she’s the last person he wants to hurt, if she’s in the path of the downward spiral, much less its architect – making a feast of the first genuine, human affection he’s felt in more like twenty years than ten – then he doesn’t know what will happen.

Daud feels a tidal pull against the corners of his eyes as he rests them against his hands, telling him nothing good.

“Not now,” he rasps into thin air pointlessly, fighting the fatigue that washes over him like he’s not already exhausted. He can’t do this now. Except like just about everything else he’s powerless to stop it, the only real choice he’s left with being when he accepts the inevitable.

When he stands it’s as if he’s on the deck of a ship, everything steady to the eye but shifting imperceptibly on his senses. The pull increases as he treads a pallbearer’s walk indoors, pain intensifying like it’ll rip his head in two if he doesn’t answer. He knows it won’t, but only from waiting the agony out with a hot cloth over his forehead, fighting the splitting headache like it’s not inevitable anyway. The games of resistance he plays just to prove he has some autonomy, however small and irrelevant it is in the greater scheme.

The corridor seems to sway as he paces down it, and though he doesn’t know where Emily is, he’s sure even before he sets his hand to his door that it’s not going to be on the other side. Not least because when he pushes it open the floor only continues a couple of short meters before being strewn across unreal space. He shouldn’t have gotten up if he didn’t want this, but had walked willingly into his fate because it’s better than being dragged against his will.

“What now?” he grinds into the void, half considering just dropping off the end of the floorboards he stands on out of spite.

“You’ve been busy.”

“I asked you a fucking question,” he growls, and surprisingly it works. The Outsider flickers into the space in front of him, a look like his cheeks have been slit into a grin with a razorblade.

“I didn’t think you still had it in you,” he remarks in the worst way possible – like he’s pleased. Daud crosses his arms over his chest and stares into black eyes that he could fall into, again, if he was foolhardy enough to trust for a second. He’s never been so tired.

“What?” he reiterates.

“It’s fascinating to watch you trying to be a man of your word, Daud,” he recites. “Because it never lasts, does it?” When all the cold bastard gets is a hardened stare, the teeth sink in deeper. “You told me you weren’t going to bed her.”

“That’s what you insisted on bringing me for?” he snarls. “To gossip?”

“To find out where it goes from here,” he remarks coolly.
“Nowhere,” he answers. “It ends, like all things.”

“There you go again,” he points out in that unnervingly sonorous whale-song way of his. Small wonder the boxes the Abbey uses to shut him down sound so terrible. “Whose satisfaction do you have in mind when you make these rules for yourself, knowing they can and will be broken?” Tilts forward, so close that it’s unbearable. “Which of you do you think gets more out of snapping your self-imposed moralities?”

“Since when have you cared for moralities?” he bites, caged enough to bolt and flitting from the spot he’s in to another snatch of flooring, even though he’ll be chased and it shows how much he’s getting to him, it’s worth it not to look at that face for a moment.

“Only yours, Daud,” he snipes without moving, voice still as close as if corpse lips are right next to his ear. “Watching you trying to be a good man and knowing it’s all doomed to failure.” Now he aparates back in front of him. “Like flipping a sand timer and watching the grains pour away.”

“I’m not a piece on the mantle for you to watch,” he growls.

“That’s all you’ve ever been,” he replies sourly. “Though I must confess, you're more interesting like this.”

‘Like what?’ he only thinks, but it makes no difference whether spoken or not.

“Angry,” the creature answers on a breath that’s not there. “You get so much more… creative. So many of your kind become predictable when their temper gets the better of them, but you, well-” he trails off, watching like he’s recapping the entire sick mess of their history together at once. “Just like old times.” Daud doesn’t need help to remember, for all his trying to forget.

“No,” he answers like that’s all there is to it; they’re not going back there for anything.

“Of course, precision has always been one of your most boring traits,” the Outsider tells as if he doesn’t know it, or it’s a coincidence he hardened in such a way; doing only what was asked of him and no more, detaching emotion and independent thought from his actions to become a tool in the truest sense of the word. One that’d be left in something like peace, however deformed.

“What a shame for you.” To have a pet less interesting to watch – disappointment after disappointment. The heart would bleed if there was anything left in it to do so.

“But emotions make you messy… an indiscriminate knife that cuts in all directions.” There’s almost a twinkle in his eyes, like stars deep in the night sky. “Is that what you’re afraid of, Daud? That worse things than her choking on your cock will happen?”

“Enough,” he says in defeat – surrender dressed like an order, though the fooling is for his benefit alone.

“I wonder if it will be,” he twists. “She seems rather insatiable, no?” The truth of the matter is no help at all, so he just scowls because there’s nothing he can say that’s in any way redeemable. “I wonder what Corvo would make of what you’ve done to his daughter,” he twists on, digging for reactions like deep-drilling for the oil he knows lies under that bedrock, and if Daud thought he couldn’t feel any worse, he was wrong. “I don’t know what would be harder for him to take,” he recites, “That when she asked for honesty you kissed her, or how devotedly she worked to get into bed with you thereafter.”

“What does it matter,” he mutters. The axe or the guillotine, different routes to the same end.
“Or perhaps that you’re the first to do what you’ve done to her,” he adds, lest it be forgotten for even a moment. “I suppose that makes you a lucky man.”

“Is Corvo so dull this is truly all you’re here for?” he spits, and for the first time in years thinks that he’s actually hit his mark. The pause in the monstrous face under cold human skin.

“Perhaps I should ask him, then,” he tempts. “Make him a little more conflicted again.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Why not?” he baits, and knows a thing or two about fishing. “It would set in motion a truly fascinating chain of events.”

“If anyone tells him it should be her.” Why he even bothers to say it questionable at best. Like what should be carries even an ounce of favour between them.

“She seems more occupied with getting what she wants than the consequences,” he answers without needing any godly insight to make that startlingly obvious observation. Daud whips his head from one side to the other, convinced for a moment he hears his name being called.

“She’s young,” he remarks morosely. “Too young.”

“That hasn’t stopped you.” Pauses for a beat, like a surgeon marking out skin before cutting. “Or her.”

“A landslide wouldn’t stop her.”

‘Daud?’

He hears it again, flitting his head around like a bird, drawing attention with such an obvious movement.

“She’s got you in the palm of her hand,” the Outsider provokes. “So why resist, Daud?” Daud. He hears it again, brows twisting in confusion. “Who are you trying to protect?”

“Her,” he insists, trying to claw his way onto higher ground; that the last thing this country needs is an Empress in an affair with the assassin of her predecessor – and though it’s part of his concern, it’s far from the only or real reason.

“From what?” the Outsider pries just to make him admit it, and he shakes his head as like a ringing in his ear it keeps coming – DaudDaudDaud.

“Me,” he grinds, and then as much as he hates it. “... You’re right,” he bleeds, crushed at last with the pressure of an ocean on top of him.

“Tell me,” the Outsider revels. Victory is always sick on his face; just like old times.

“If she were using me and I felt nothing it wouldn’t be a problem.” If she were using him and he felt anything less than what he does it might still be manageable. Except the person he’s really trying to protect is himself; to stop her from hurting him a way he thought he couldn’t be hurt – for both their sakes. “But like this… I don’t know what I’m capable of.”

“Daud?” it comes again, and this time they both surely hear it, though the Outsider’s expression doesn’t change as he leans forward, shadows hanging across his face like they’re leaking out of the black pits of his eyes.
He offers a sycophantic murmur that could slay a city with two words. “I do.”

“Daud!”

He snaps out of it like being ripped out of deep seas on a pneumatic winch, tearing him from the void before either of them expect. Reacts instinctively, snatching for the closest thing to him with a vicious snarl of long-programmed habits. Get ready to kill first and ask questions later.

That’s how he comes to standing in his quarters with Emily Kaldwin’s throat gripped too tight in his hand, panicked gasp that’s nothing like pleasure and her eyes fearful on him. She’s been calling him the whole time, he realises, managed to pull him from the trance – no one is supposed to be able to do that, humans couldn’t exert a greater pull on the void than the Outsider himself, yet here he is, tearing his hand off her like she’ll burn to touch.

He tells her the only thing there is left to say, but means it in a way unlike the previous times. Not an expression of frustration, or calculated move on the chess board of their endless game, but a warning and declaration that must be heeded now before anything worse happens. Even as it hurts to say – though not as much as it will if he lets this go on any longer.

“You have to leave.”

The look on her face is fire, scowling and indignant as she retorts, “What?!”

Chapter End Notes

The Outsider on the subject of Daud: DID SOMEONE ASK TO BE TRIGGERED?

Me on the subject of Daud and the Outsider - "They're like the WORST exes, but not in the 'hate one another violently and refuse to interact' way but in the 'I know you so well you slimy piece of shit and guess the fuck what it's button-pushing time' one." They're the kind of exes who would drunk call each other at 4am to spew really manipulative shit at each other. (Aka the first game's DLC, with the new DLC being a 'no this time I *mean* it' version of their constantly-occurring breakup... no one's fooled old man.)

There were some late edition additions to this chapter that really fucked me up in the best possible way, and also welcome to what is probably the only use of the word 'cock' in this entire fic. Probably.

Anyway that's it for now see y'all naughty children next week!
The Forty-Fifth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily won’t be told – she does the telling.

Chapter Notes

Wow, TGIF, right?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Emily Kaldwin is trying not to lose her head, but it’s hard when Daud is being so infuriating it’s all she can do not to slap him. And only then because she’s not sure what he’d do back.

“What?!” she yells – it’s firmly at that stage now – having bleated his name to no avail for what felt like an age. After she found him stood poker straight in the middle of his room, staring with dead eyes at something that wasn’t there and wordless mumbling lips. So unresponsive to her calls she’d even considered if he was having some kind of seizure, only for him to ‘snap’ out of it by grabbing her by the throat, an act which he’d had no apparent difficulty with, nor telling her the last thing she wants to hear.

“I mean it,” he insists, tingling sensation on her throat where he’d torn his hand back as soon as he realised what he was doing. Somehow the reinforcement makes it too much to bear, so she lunges at him, fists balling on either side of his collar as he stops her getting any further with hands wrapped around each forearm. The grip between them is tight enough to crush coal into diamond, a pressure that reads in her face as she repeats herself to him for the last time.

“What?"

“It’s gone too far already,” he tells her.

“Then what difference does it make?” she retorts, pushing against the immovable weight of his hands just to feel the force of him pressing back against her. “I swore I wasn’t going to leave until I beat you.”

“You’ve already won, Emily,” he rasps like begging for relief, only to follow with a jab into her weakest point; what she loves to hear from him. “So please.”

“Fight me,” she demands desperately.

“I can’t,” he answers. “You just have to go.”

“Why?” she demands, not missing the role reversal. That it’s now her pursuing this line of questioning about why he wants the things he does.
“Because” he begins torturously, “this isn’t right.”

“You told me you don’t believe in such things.”

“Then I was wrong,” he insists, lying.

“What happened to you just now?” she diverts.

“Nothing,” he keeps lying.

“I find you unresponsive and mumbling like a madman, and you expect me to-?” Then she puts the pieces together. “Wait… were you speaking with the Outsider?” Reads the confirmation in his eyes.

“How could you know that?” he poses.

“You think I grew up around my father without recognising the signs?” she shoots, and finally unwinds the vicelike grip of her hands in his shirt. “I thought you didn’t talk to him anymore.”

“So did I.”

“What does he want?” He sends her a low look.

“To meddle,” he mutters.

“Is that where all… this is coming from?” she presses. “What did he say?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Daud,” she says like holding down a brand. It feels like she’s said his name more in the last ten minutes than all these weeks put together, but it doesn’t seem to be losing much of its power, because he buckles with a harrowed look.

“He’ll tell Corvo.”

“Tell him what?” Now the look he gives her intensifies, the crawling heat it sends up her neck soon recognisable. When she realises what he means her grip loosens ever so slightly. “He wouldn’t.”

“That’s what I said,” he comments. “Don’t mistake what you’ve heard from his newest pet to think he cares about us beyond what interests him. This is no more than a puzzle after we-” he breaks off, then picks back up again like changing an audiograph recording, drawing a hand across his jaw like he has to mould the words with his fingers before they leave his mouth, “… didn’t kill each other.”

“Is that what he expected?”

“Don’t worry,” he remarks cordially. “It wouldn’t have been you to go.”

“Then he underestimated me,” she points out caustically.

“He’s not the only one.” How he can look at her like he does and speak such words while still urging her to leave will never make sense.

“He can’t tell Corvo,” she insists instead.

“Now you’re underestimating him,” he comes back around.
“Well I… I want to speak with him myself,” she demands, treating the straws that she grasps for like the most ironclad of battle plans. One thing she learned all too quickly in her role as a political figurehead; confidence is contagious, and when plans are the weakest that’s when your assurance of their success should be most fortified.

“How, by sending a royal summons?” he mocks with dark sarcasm.

“No,” she snaps. “There are ways, aren’t there? Things you can do.” He gives her a hard look, then his eyes dart to the tellingly empty space on the wall.

She hadn’t been idle while mulling over the godawful mess that’d been made of things between them, giving herself as much as him space to process what’d happened – how or why it was the wrong kind of satisfaction. That maybe his weakness isn’t what she wants after all. Or not like that, at least. She’d finally come in search of him to make some sense of the wreckage when she stumbled upon this wretched scene.

“I thought I told you to—”

“And I ignored you,” she snaps. “So whatever it is you have to do, just do it,” she orders, and can see the resistance in him like trying to drag a mule. But then, with as much as she’s learned of him, she stops herself yanking on the reins like that will make him walk. “What will it help if I leave?” she asks more gently. “Let me try to fix this.” He frowns even harder.

“Why?” he asks, instead of how.

“You think I want my father to know about… this?” she answers uncomfortably, and though it’s a slim shade better than ‘us’ it’s not by much. “It’s hardly going to reflect any better on me.” He looks like he can’t believe her audacity to claim any portion of the blame. As if it’s not been at least half her doing. To be conservative.

“You do realise,” he comments, “that he might actually kill me.” There’s a foreboding she doesn’t like much in his comment, like he’d still have to be beaten all over again. Corvo could take him, though she doesn’t like that much either.

“Which I thought we agreed is the more merciful fate,” she counters. “He’s overprotective of me already, I’d be lucky if he allowed me out of his sight for years if this got out.” Daud looks almost like he’d laugh if he wasn’t utterly inconsolable.

“It’s not that simple.”

“I don’t care what it takes,” she retorts fiercely. “As long as,” she hesitates, and then begrudgingly finishes the thought, consequences be what they may. “As long as I can stay.” Only saying it does she realise the depths to which she’s not ready to leave, and not just out of contradiction. He gives her a long-wearing look; one that makes her think he’s telling the truth when he says she’s already won.

His mouth opens to speak, but before he can make a sound winces like something’s troubling him, a hazy quality to his eyes that she suspects has an otherworldly source. Then he blinks heavily and is back in the room with her again.

“Fine,” he concedes, but as if there’s someone else on the end of an invisible fishing line fixed to his jaw. “I’ll need to prepare a few things,” he adds ominously. “You might think about what you’re planning to say.” In a flash he’s gone.
Daud lights the end of a tightly bound bundle of dried herbs and shakes the flames out before raising it to his face, blowing on the embers until they flare. Orange light picks out the lines of his stern expression like the monster his legend would paint him as.

She leans awkwardly against his desk with her back to the open window, breathing in the pungent smell given off by the smouldering clump of flora as the breeze draws it past her. Wonders if this is really all there is to making contact with the Outsider.

“Focus on the smoke,” he tells her, standing only a few paces away holding it in the hand where his mark stands out with perfect clarity. Like his very bones are the shrine.

“And?” She expects more elaborate ritual, some markings or drawing – a ceremony of any sort, not a slowly burning wrap of garden clippings.

“And focus on the smoke,” he rounds in a way that might be playful if he weren’t so desperately serious. “Nothing else.”

She contemplates a sigh but thinks better of it – he is the expert, supposedly, so resigns herself to following instruction as she trains her eyes on the curling plumes that rise where the dry material singes away, reminiscent of the meditative exercises he pushed her to before.

“That’s better,” he murmurs. The fragrant wisps drift upwards in wild shapes that have no control and exist for only a moment, never to be replicated again. She tunnels into it, swearing almost that she can hear waves, though they’re hundreds of miles from the sea. Softly, an instruction comes. "Kneel."

It’s not even the first time today he’s requested that of her, but this is quite different. Though not so much that she doesn’t do as asked, still watching the spiralling shapes of smoke rise above the sharp cut of his mark as she lowers herself onto the hard stone floor.

Daud speaks again, but not to her, “She’s ready.”

It’s rather belated that she realises after blinking over-dry eyes that background is no longer the same.

Empress Kaldwin comes a voice that niggles in the back of her mind like a stone in the bottom of a boot, The Second.

“First of my name,” she corrects almost unconsciously, and finally tears away from the fixed point of Daud’s hand; while certain she hasn’t moved, it’s the surroundings around her that’ve split like fragments of glass dropped on a hard floor. Strange but not unfamiliar – it feels much like the space of her dreams. Almost too much. “I’ve been here before,” she remarks without necessarily meaning for it to be out loud as she gets to her feet.

“What?” Daud bites.

“So you remember.” The Outsider shifts into view like adjusting mirrors, new and old at the same time. “It’s been a while, Empress.”

“That was real?” she replies as ordinarily as speaking to an old acquaintance in court, not a god whose familiarity with should brand her a heretic – though not that it’s harmed her father.
“Quite so,” he remarks, a tilt of his head the only indication of shifting gaze between herself and Daud. “Hit me with your slipper, I recall.”

“What?” Daud spits incredulously. “When did you-”

“I’ve had the lecture from Corvo,” he intercedes, a single finger raised in a disarmingly human gesture, but still wrong, like something put together from well-crafted parts but not truly organic, not living. “I don’t require it from you too.”

“I always thought that was a dream,” she remarks distantly; only being here again triggers her to remember it, like a fugue that’s tied to the place. A first meeting she’d taken for imaginary, too used to nightmares and so alarmed by the creature that greeted her she whipped off a shoe to beat the monster with. In those days, fighting back was the only way to get through the night.

“In a sense,” he answers. “How you’ve grown.” A cold shiver runs up her back, like the icy tip of a finger.

“Enough small talk,” she interjects. “We’ve matters to discuss.”

“I see why you like her, Daud,” he remarks offhandedly. “Such force of character.”

“Don’t toy with your food,” Daud growls in response, and she’s not sure how to feel about the words he makes her out with, though it’s not a feeling she’d outright deny – treading water just in front of a leviathan’s gaping maw. His body language is completely different here; he holds himself not like he’s about to spring into a fight any moment, as she’s used to, but like he might bolt and run.

“It’s fascinating to watch you two getting along so well,” he comments rather perversely for any kind of godly creature, though Daud’s face remains solidly unimpressed. “Better than dear Corvo could have ever imagined.”

“It was his idea to send me here,” she points out. Not that it’d make him any more amenable to where they’ve ended up.

“Ah, but who do you think first whispered the never-quite forgotten name to him?” he poses facetiously, tilt to his head like a predatory bird assessing how best to rip the soft parts out from under a hard shell. “Insinuated what would happen unless you could be taught to escape even the Knife of Dunwall’s blade?”

“You meant you…” she mumbles quietly, overlapping with a growl from Daud that finishes after her.

“-Bastard,” he growls. “You couldn’t let alone.”

“It was your idea,” she reeled. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“I thought it would be,” the Outsider pauses, and Emily finds she knows what he’ll say before he even does, “interesting.”

“You thought I’d wind up dead,” Daud butts in.

“Quite so, but this is much better,” he replies, “I'm so rarely surprised.” Then his focus is fixed on her like she might get sucked into the endless depths of black eyes. “I wonder, what could motivate you to bed the man who killed your mother and abducted you?”
“I hardly planned it,” she fumbles without much in the way of decorum, “I- it just… happened.” His presence set her off-balance, like they’re on the deck of a colossal ship, or standing on the back of a whale.

“These things do not just happen, not with him,” the Outsider seems to lecture, like she hasn’t gotten enough of that already. “I don’t think you realise how special this makes you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think it’s purely physical for him?” the Outsider poses like Daud isn’t standing right there, glowering. “That if someone else with your…” stops for a moment, as if trying to remember the words, “pleasing features, would make him act the way he does?”

“Stop this,” Daud mutters, though it’s like he’s never spoken at all.

“… No,” she mumbles uncertainly, no idea where this is going but compelled to answer, like she daren’t lie to this creature. “I suppose not.”

“You suppose correct,” the Outsider lords, and she hadn’t gotten the impression that he was anything like this. So desperately invasive, veering between the desire to know and consume. “It is you in particular and alone that has such sway over him – and that’s important to you, is it not?”

“… Yes,” she answers reluctantly.

“What you don’t realise is how rare that is,” he narrates. “So few have claimed a place in his heart, and you’re quite the expansionist.”

“His what?” she half-echoes.

“Spare us the hollow metaphors,” Daud snaps like he’s coming out of something, fighting to be heard above the roaring waters of their conversation.

“Why I’ve never seen a more successful campaign,” he continues belligerently, and she suspects he hears Daud just fine. “Is it gratifying,” he continues conspiratorially, “knowing how much you could hurt him, if you wished?”

“What?” she says in confusion or denial, and then a smaller, “… I don’t.”

“Know?” the Outsider poses. “Or wish to?”

“Both,” she answers uncomfortably. Though the god barely moves, the slight lean forwards feels like taking a powerful wave head on, bearing a proposition with a feeling like her mouth will fill with saltwater the moment she opens it to answer.

“Are you sure?”

She hesitates at first before remarking, “Most of the time.” She has a temper, of course – as does he – and though it may get the better of her sometimes, it’s not who she is. “But I stopped-” it’s hard to grasp the right words, like grabbing live fish from a stream, “-truly wishing him ill some time ago.”

Daud looks at her like he’s drowning.

“Why?” the Outsider asks simply, but she’s had enough of that damn question and blows like a boiling pot.
“Why must everyone keep asking me that!” she belts, sending a ripple that could shake the entire plane. Her indignation seems to shock them both. “How is it possible that I can be the most powerful person in the Empire yet unable to make a decision without needing to account for myself?”

“Because your choices affect others,” Daud rolls with a tense anger in his voice. “People aren’t dice to be thrown.”

“I disagree,” the Outsider chimes in all too predictably; they make a truly dysfunctional pair, she can tell even by this short exchange. “The question is merely of what game you wish to play.” Spoken as if he’d like to join in.

“I’m not playing anything,” she snaps, splitting the same disgruntled look between both of them as she continues, “and I’m sick of this insistent line of questioning about the ulterior motives I’m presumed to have. If I say I don’t have any, my word on the matter should be the end of it.”

“Is it truly so easy to forgive your mother’s murderer?” asks the Outsider. Holding her under a gaze so searching she finds herself with the unusual sensation of defending her case at some ungodly tribunal.

“I said nothing of forgiveness,” she bites, raw still – in a way she expects she’ll always be. “But is it so impossible to believe I’ve no interest in torturing him further?”

“Yes.” This comes from Daud.

“Haven’t you done enough of that yourself?” she puts to him, and he looks back at her pitifully. Drawing on his own lessons, she offers a balanced, “Hiram Burrows is the reason my mother is dead, not the assassin who fulfilled the contract.”

“And thus, you take him guiltlessly into your bed?” the Outsider remarks pointedly.

“No,” she rushes. “But... I can’t go about drawing every thought in my head from a ten-year-old trauma,” she admits arduously, not expecting to have to explain herself in this way when she asked to commune with this mysterious entity. “What reason could I have to drag it up from the past every waking moment?” Looking at Daud she wonders if that’s not exactly what he’s been doing; how lost can one man be in his own mistakes? “So I wasn’t thinking about all these damned questions at the time, I simply,” she concludes laboriously, hesitating before admitting the absurd, simple truth of it. “… wanted to.” Still does, so help her. Spares a glance at him and wonders if he does too.

“You are interesting like that,” the Outsider seems to compliment. “Living in the present, taking what gives you satisfaction without concerning yourself with the before or after.”

“Neither have affected my ability to enjoy myself thus far,” she responds aloofly, and then tilting her head back a little, testing the boundaries of this creature that was once a human, even teenage boy, adds, “Besides, one must take advantage of pleasures wherever possible, they can be so hard to come by.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” he poses with a sickly twist to his features, leaning into her even further, until she can smell something that’s like driftwood and fishbones, sickly and satisfying at the same time.

“This is beside the point,” Daud suddenly butts in, reminding her that he’s there at all if she’s perfectly honest with herself. Enigmatic hardly covers the creature that hangs before her, far more
cryptic than the easily read script of painful human expressions Daud holds. Exasperation, perhaps even impatience. “Or did you request this audience for flirtation alone?”

“Jealous?” poses the Outsider viciously.

“He’s right,” she interjects, and is pleased that neither seem clear who or what she means at first. So they don’t know everything, not even between them. “I did here come for a reason.”

“You were invited, Empress,” the Outsider corrects brusquely. “You’re in my kingdom now.”

“Forgive me for not sending a gift in advance,” she quips.

“Those aren’t the ways of this land,” he remarks almost playfully. “I offer the gifts here.”

“That’s not going to-” Daud starts, and then silences when Emily raises a swift hand to stop him. Whether he’s following orders or simply too shocked to continue remains to be seen, while the Outsider seems intrigued by the whole exchange. He’s a creature that loves complexity, so she’s been led to believe, driven by curiosity and boredom free from the restraints humanity or morality place on such reasoning. She supposes it would make her and Daud’s involvement rather interesting in such a being’s eyes.

“I came to issue a demand,” she announces, savouring the curiosity of the big game before beginning her hunt. “You will not speak of what’s happened between Daud and myself to my father.”

“That’s what you were so desperate to tell me?” the Outsider seems astonished, and then settles into something harder. “What makes you think you’re in a position to make demands?”

“Well, if you breathe a word of this to Corvo,” she begins, taking a breath to steel herself before she continues. She’d done as Daud suggested and thought about this before getting here, so knows exactly what she’s going to say and must merely muster up the courage to say it, “then I shalln’t accept your gifts.”

“What?!” Unusually, Daud and the Outsider overlap for this one moment, two voices echoing as one.

“Who says they’re on offer?” the god follows up, brimming with what might even be spite.

“Ever,” she specifies carefully “I mean to say that as long as I live, you will never have me as one of your marked.” She ignores the looks like she’s lost her mind – from both of them.

“A curious bargaining chip, Empress,” the deity remarks, hands moving from being folded neatly behind his back to crossed over his chest – a pose that reminds her of another of his chosen, who stands by staring at her like he can't believe what he's hearing. “What makes you think I desire you?”

The phrasing is surely intentional, but she bores him with a look to ridicule the asking of such a foolish question. Even with black eyes, she doesn’t think she mistakes what she senses in them when he looks at her, or what it makes her feel in response.

“That’s a chance I’m willing to take,” she remarks. “Are you?”

“You’ll be desperate,” he lapses, the implications seeming inescapable. “You’d change your mind.”
“Try me,” she dares defiantly. “I swear to you on my mother’s name that if this secret is not kept, I will close myself off to you forever.”

“You would forsake such power to protect him?” It’s offered with an incremental yet endlessly dismissive jerk of his chin, and she marvels at how the bitterness between them seems to run both ways. What high could beset such a fall.

“He’s suffered enough,” she decrees like an official edict: to just let him rest. “Nor can I say I’m keen for my father to find out about us for my own sake.” Us, she uses with a sickening pang to her stomach, but it’s what needs to be said so she must. She fixes the creature with a single-minded look, resolved in her intention to battle a god in willpower and come out victorious. “The choice is yours, simply put,” she poses in an ambitious reversal of fates, “of what would be more interesting?”

The silence could have stretched on for years for all she knows in a space such as this. Knowing only that when it does break it’s a crashing of waves against a shore that remains in place.

“Emily Kaldwin,” he murmurs thoughtfully – well played, it suggests of her move on a board that stretches all across this twisted plane. “I expect we’ll meet again.”

Then with a gasp she’s back in Daud’s room, shaky lamplight and shadows across the floor.

“It’s over already?” she remarks in surprise, blinking heavily like she can’t make sense of what she sees. Like Daud staring at her like a god in her own right.

“That,” he says over hoarse breath, “was incredible.”

Chapter End Notes

Soooo this is a fairly critical chapter, I suppose, and contains some important stuff in terms of Emily's 'forgiving' (or lack thereof) of Daud. But also what she wants (or doesn't want) with him.

It's a tricky line to walk, but I definitely wanted to make clear she's not and won't ever 'forgive' him, cuz that's not how it works. However, at the same time she's not living with 'you killed my mother' as like her starting point of every single thought she has around or about him (at least not anymore) and a lot of the time she's *not* thinking about that or anything in particular, she's just doing whatever she feels like. Not saying that's a great approach either, but this is an important section for the rationalising of just how this mad ship has reached the place it has.

This whole thing with the Outsider I had dreamed up long before their relatively tame interactions in DH2 became a thing, and being a poly!Emily multishipper trash any Emsider hints you may be getting are 100% intentional. 'What if the Outsider is a massive creeper and he *really* likes Kaldwins and Attanos and Emily is both so he's all kinds of all over that?’ was a thought I had with a friend a very long time ago, and so help me I'm very attached to it.

That said this exchange shouldn't really imply that Emily has any real power over the
Outsider, or that their bargaining was real as such. He likes playing with people, and Emily has piqued him enough to keep that interest and not immediately jeopardise her favour by doing The Thing, and will instead hang on (for now, at least) to see how it goes. Especially between Em and Daud. Specifically. Sexually. Did I mention he's a creeper?

Finally, to the person who guessed in comments that maybe sending here had been an idea the Outsider planted in Corvo's head at least 20+ chapters ago: well done.

Next week we take a look at the aftermath, so I hope y'all like hotsauce.
The Forty-Sixth Lesson

Chapter Summary

The walls come down.

Chapter Notes

There are chapters that you wait to write for what feels like an age. Or 140k almost. This is both of those. Hit the button early cuz I felt like it (and might be busy tomorrow day when I usually do this editing).

I'm an old school writer, and as such I will warn for explicit content, but I'm not going to individually tag every which-what and who-now that happens in something because I feel knowing exactly what's going to come up detracts from the experience of reading (at least for the first time). For this reason, I tell y'all this one is SPICY, and you have been warned. That's what spicy means.

I've also upped the rating from Teen & Up to Mature, so if you're not of an appropriate age to be reading you gotta make that call. It's not my job to stop anyone. That said, most could do way, way worse than getting 47 chapters into this fic to read smut so really, if you've made it this far then you've probably earned it.

That said, this is a long one (over 6k), one of my favourites (*groan*) so off we go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The after-effects of meeting the Outsider linger like one too many glasses of wine. A smell of brine and smoke soaked into Emily’s clothes like she’s been in front of a burning pyre on a beach. She asks the first thing that comes to mind.

“Is he always like that?”

“Like what?” Daud's standing a few paces away from her with a look like he’s about to start building shrines to the great Empress Kaldwin – the one he bedded, rather than murdered. She doesn’t think she’d mind.

“So…” She chooses her words carefully, standing on shaky sea legs. “Easy to manipulate.” Daud surprises her with a bold laugh.

“Never,” he rasps, “Not in all the years I’ve known him.” He gives her a look that she swears could undo a couple of buttons on the shirt she’s wearing. His shirt, which she’s suddenly so conscious of against her skin. “In case you don’t realise,” he adds – expansively, for once, “that was quite remarkable.”
“How?”

“People don’t make bargains with him,” he explains. “They accept them.”

“Then he must have a talent for selecting poor negotiators.” Daud gives another broken-down chuckle. With a trick of the gifts granted to him and not-quite promised to her, he crosses the space between them and is suddenly close enough to set both his hands to her face, light touch of his fingertips against her cheeks. Holds her gaze to his with so much intensity she thinks he’s more like the black-eyed god than would give either of them comfort to admit.

“Did you mean it?” The words are so quiet they would be lost were they any further apart. It could be any number of things she said, but it doesn’t really matter. She meant them all.

“I… of course,” she replies from the cradle of his hands. “Did you really think I just wanted to torment you?”

His expression tells her he did, and that’s what was amiss earlier. He couldn’t believe she’d want to do what she had for its own sake – for anything good at all – and that’s why it felt wrong. He’d given her his vulnerability believing it was a just a cheap thrill, some joke for her to laugh at.

“Can you blame me?” He looks at her new. Trying on the belief that she could want him for something more than a way to flatter her ego. As if he can’t see anything in himself worth desiring more than a power trip.

“No.” Her hands rise like they’re full of hot air. One alighting on his chest, the other higher to his face, shadowing his jaw as to different end she repeats, “No, Daud.”

He kisses her right this time. A simple bend of his arms to bring her to him, her own against his chest as he folds around her. Damn it all if this isn’t something she wants, fighting to kiss him back as she pulls closer. Like she can get inside him by pressure alone.

The past is always going to be there, she knows. But in a choice between wallowing in being still angry, still upset and taking it out on someone who knows those things better than anyone – or letting him edge her against the desk, weight pressing ever more surely into her as he kisses her like he can draw back his life from her lips. Well, she’s decidedly more in favour of one than the other. It’s a truer power to break with the past – she’s seen what it’s done to him – and not to forgive, but at least move on. Find something else to focus on. This does just fine.

She even dares to wonder if the Outsider’s comments about jealousy might not have some root in the truth, because there’s nothing slow or measured about him now. In fact he’s practically possessive, holding her in place to kiss so thoroughly she practically aches.

His mouth comes off hers but stays close, crowding over and around her, breathing her in like fumes. “Tell me you want me,” he murmurs. She might melt and pour right through his fingers.

“I want you,” she echoes more dutifully than she expects out of herself. It’s rewarded when he pulls her lips back onto his. She wouldn’t have so ambitiously worked her way into his bed if she didn’t, but had never said in as many words – reluctant to admit it, even, only realising now how much it matters to him.

Because he’s no less human than she, and wants what she does: to be known as more than an object. He pulls away clumsily and trails over her jaw, close to her ear as he mouths the junction of her neck, and then hardly raising his lips from her at all adds in a not-quite question, “You want me to touch you.”
“Yes.” As if she hasn’t already been giving that impression, though the reasons why have been varied and lost at times. He makes a low noise against her, pausing with his breath hot over the skin of her neck.

“Yes, what?” A prompt. She clenches like he’s slotted a key into her back and wound her a turn tighter. His hand sits heavy over her collarbone, so he must feel the sharp rise of her chest before she answers.

“Yes Daud,” she delivers as per his request. His hand moves lower, plying apart the buttons of his shirt with growing familiarity.

“Good.” The tone of this good is unlike all others he’s given her before now. She’d do an awful lot to hear it again. “Then show me.”

“What?” She’s rather more distracted by his fingers drifting tantalisingly over her breastbone. He pulls her forward and shifts their positions with the handling of someone with a lifetime’s experience shifting bodies into position, putting himself behind her against the desk. Held to his front like he could put a wristbow to her neck and reveal this whole affair as an elaborate demonstration of a new way she could get herself killed. Except the reveal doesn’t come.

“Show me,” he repeats, a hand still slowly plying buttons apart at an agonising pace down her front.

“Why can’t you?” she wheedles in a voice that might be ever so slightly strained, attempting to move against him and finding herself anchored in place by his other hand firm on her hip.

“Because you’re used to having things done for you,” he answers almost teasingly behind her, then with a twist like a hot knife, “and I’d like to watch.”

Emily is rapidly forced to come to terms with who and what she’s dealing with in a whole new way. She relents and shifts a hand urgently to the junction between her legs. His face hangs over her shoulder slowly drawing the shirt off it, mouth ghosting along the exposed skin as he watches her ply fingers past clothing to rub herself.

This isn’t normally how these things go for her, but that may be exactly the point, she observes in some detached corner of her mind. The rest of it is rather more occupied with the quick circling of fingertips in an unquestionable pool of her arousal.

Although she knows the quickest ways to satisfaction at her own hands. It’s not enough or really what she wants, especially when he’s holding her to him firmly enough that she can feel him pressing into her back. However, she can show him what she wants, so soon pushes a finger past tense heat and puts her weight back on him more forcefully. It works because she feels the groan that comes from his chest through her back, the hand around her hip firm as he practically grinds on her.

“Good,” he growls against her again. If they haven’t come a long way for him to be so free with his praise, not least under such circumstances. It only encourages her. Moving faster, and when even that’s not enough adding a second finger. The effect of which she soon feels throbbing against her. “Fuck, Emily,” he groans, and his tongue along the edge of her ear is a pleasant surprise.

“I wouldn’t mind,” she remarks coyly, and is pleasantly surprised when his hips jerk dry against her.

His face comes down into the curve of her neck for a moment while a hand reaches inside her shirt.
to grab needily for one of her breasts — this is when it works, she realises. When they’re both too far gone to be in their heads about the ifs and whys. When there’s no space to think about anything more than how to sate this craving for each other.

He raises up again to groan into the damp shell of her ear, “Go to bed.”

“Gladly.” For the first time she's absolutely thrilled with the order. Though his attitude is quite different to before, she’s getting along with this change of pace just fine. He’s finally demonstrating exactly how he wants her, right down to the details she hadn’t realised how much she appreciated.

She strolls across the room with an ashamedly put-on swagger, not missing how he hangs back to watch her go. They have some light this time, a lamp that he brings with him when he finally follows her, or so she deduces from the way the shadows chase her across the floor.

“Stay there,” he issues when she’s part-way climbing onto the bed, knees pressing into the bedding. She freezes in place, awaiting further instruction. It comes. “Finish undressing.” He’s so bossy, she observes with a thrill.

“Yes, Daud,” she plays along beautifully, sure it’s having an effect on him – and not only from the bulge in ever-tighter clothing.

There’s not much left to be done of the task he sets her to, her shirt already half-off and much-abused of late shorts clinging to her. She sets to demonstratively quick work of the remaining buttons he hadn’t teased open already. “What about you?”

“Later.” His eyes follow her every movement as she discards a shirt that’s technically his, then bends forward to slide the shorts over her backside. He’s more behind than in front of her in this position, something that appears intentional when he sets down the lamp and moves onto the bed at her back her again. The back of his fingers trail from her waist to shoulder as he delivers the next raw order. “As you were.”

Emily gives out a very undignified whine. “But I want you to touch me.”

Only she wonders if that’s not exactly why he’s doing this. Especially when he slots around her and rasps, “I know.”

Daud circles a hand to her front and draws it from her stomach up to a breast. Takes the weight in a cupped palm as his mouth comes back to her neck. Entirely too frustrated to do anything clever, she just lets her head roll back onto his shoulder and slips a hand between her legs again. It seems she might not be the only one who enjoys making the other weak.

She’s slack enough to almost topple forward when his fingertips find her nipples, and if not for the arm he wraps around her she might have done so, rather than just wobble and shiver against him. He holds her a little below her collarbone while the other hand roams more freely across her skin; stroking her stomach, teasing breasts and squeezing her by the haunch as best pleases one of them or the other. The difference is negligible. She’s no doubt whatsoever that he’d do this all night if it’s how long it took for her to do as he asks – just like all his other obstinate methodologies.

She uses her free hand to make a simple adjustment, if he’s so determined to see her come undone in this way. Pushes his hand higher to sit around her neck, a ragged exhale telling her he’s received the message.

“Em,” he groans into her. Whether that’s an intentional abbreviation or he just doesn’t make it any
further is left to interpretation.

His palm is warm and a little coarse against the expanse of her throat as he applies a precise grip, holding just firmly enough to make the pressure felt without being really inhibitive. He’d never knowingly hurt her. At least, not without her insisting on it first. And this is what she wants.

She gasps and drops her weight even more into his hold, stops focusing on anything except the shape of him around her as she inches closer to the edge. Finally comes like going over a waterfall, pushing into his hand and feeling her face flush as she crashes harder than she thought possible.

“Atta girl,” he slurs behind her, lust-groggy and most definitely gone to the moment. She twists as if to turn around but goes nowhere, still held quite immovably in the pose of his choosing. “Ah ah,” he sounds almost in reprimand. This is so different to what she had in mind, but she’s definitely not complaining. “Not done yet.”

His hand strokes gently up from her neck to clasp her jaw. When he draws a finger over her lips, she quickly parts them and takes it into her mouth, tonguing the pad of his fingertip as she closes her mouth around the first knuckle and *sucks*. The noise she feels rolling out of him eventually takes the shape of an admission.

“You can’t imagine what you’re doing to me,” he groans through her hair.

She only permits him out from between her teeth to smarmily answer, “I think I can.” Not least because she feels it throbbing hard against her behind.

She comes down onto her hands when he releases her, head hanging loose and low as she takes in the cues of him finally removing his shirt. It drifts onto the floor in the corner of her vision. What she notes is that it’s not succeeded by anything else. “Is that it?”

Then he’s skin against her back as he leans over her and wraps an arm around her chest, breasts pressing into forearm with a hot mouth that scores a path from between her shoulders up the back of her neck.

“Not even nearly,” he promises over her shoulder, knees between hers on the bed, legs – clothed, unfortunately – pressing against her bare ones. Then he backs away a little and his open palm brushes around the curves of her bent form, drawing agonisingly towards the centre.

“Then hurry up,” she urges, shunting down onto her forearms and pulling her back away from the heat of his skin. He straightens up and his other hand spreads flat over her tailbone. If he hasn’t made a picture of her; up on her hands and knees, practically pleading – without lowering herself quite *that* much – him to touch her.

“Patience.” He works tiny movements of his fingers into the small of her back with one hand, and then finally a brush against wet heat – but no more, so she makes a terrible wanting sound as he continues, “I want to savour this.”

“You enjoy making me wait too much.” She wrenches into a moan when he pushes a finger into her – at *last*.

“Then don’t make it so gratifying.” Not being able to see him having no effect on her consciousness of whose knuckle slides past tight pressure from coming once, *hard*, already. It’s all him.

“Fuck,” she gasps as he pumps a thicker digit than hers. “Yes.”
“Yes what?” His hand stills, and she slams one of her own against the bed in incoherent frustration.

“Yes, Daud,” she heaves, pushing back on her knees to force herself further onto him. “Don’t you dare stop.” His chuckle is mitigated by resumed motion.

“Very well, highness,” he purrs.

He grants a rhythm closest to what she’s wanted so far, but even with the addition of a second finger still finds herself pushing back into him for more – of him. Of everything. She feels his hand turn at the deepest point, then fingers curl and she makes a strangled sound into a handful of bedsheets. Yet the reprimanding click of his tongue is ripe with foreboding.

“Let me hear you,” he instructs like it’s her newest lesson, but she’s not made much of a reputation for herself as a diligent student.

“No until you stop fooling around.” She outright presses a palm over her mouth as he pushes deeper and curves his fingers again. Silences herself out of spite, even as it sends shockwaves through her.

His next three words he utters are indicative of the scale of trouble still to come.

“That a challenge?”

By the time Daud actually finishes undressing he has made Emily forget her own name several times and drenched his hand in ways unmentionable to company of any calibre. But she’s good at being quiet and hasn’t given in. She doesn’t know how long it’s been in real time, just that it’s far too long for any normal creature of flesh and blood to be content not to get their own satisfaction. What he is she intends to find out.

He’s still behind her. Something she’s contemplated in moments of adequate mental cohesion – if it’s more comfortable for him somehow being out of sight. Though he hasn’t seemed to mind her turning around to watch the careful expression on his face as he drove his hand in and out of her until she was soaked all the way down the inside of her thighs.

“All right.” He’s throaty after he finally concedes to discarding the last of his clothing. His withdrawn hand is then unceremoniously changed for the impossibly hard shape pressing flat against her as he admits, “You win this round.”

“Too right,” she replies with a voice that’s not so composed either, but rewards him with an open noise when he moves back enough to position himself. One hand over the back of her hip, the other holding himself as he rubs end alone through slickness that’s all his doing – practical at first, but after a while definitely teasing. “How many times do I have to tell you I want you before you’ll believe me?” she spits with an ambitious motion to push back onto him, only to get held in place with a firm grip on her hip.

“Just once more.” If she wasn’t quite mad when she decided to get into a sexual relationship with her mother’s assassin, she’d definitely be after all this.

“Daud,” she uses a starkly Imperial tone, “I want you.” He presses against the initial tension of her and she lets out an encouraging sound, then with a much more needy inclination, “Fuck me.”

Although she’s supposedly good at being quiet, it’s fortunate there’s no one else in the house or for
hundreds of miles around, because the volume and character of the cry when he sinks into her lack any semblance of restraint.

“Good girl,” she thinks he murmurs, both hands around her hips as his press blessedly against her. Though it’s driven her to madness and back again to have waited so long, none of that matters now – the overwhelming pleasure of feeling him throb inside her, pulsing tight heat that he worked open so thoroughly.

“Push back against me,” he tells her, so she lifts up on her hands and presses her weight into him. Almost bounces as he moves in and bottoms out at the limit of how far inside her he can get without melding together. “Fuck, like that.”

Then it all seems to happen at the same time. She holds steady with a string of escalatingly desperate sounds as he runs into her hard and fast, shining light on the proverbs about screwing a person senseless.

She drops down onto her elbows, then even further until her arms are flat against the bed, back arched and chest to the covers. Rear held firmly between his hands as she loses herself with the security of knowing he’s also completely gone to be like this. The games are finally over, and it’s just about enjoying where they’ve been left at the end of it.

When the unrelenting pace that knocks just about every coherent thought out of her head finally lets up, she’s so slack she’s almost flat on the bed. Grippy hands shift as he stills in her, breath audible and just a little cooling against her back. This is what he’d been holding back? And she’d foolishly thought after one night together that she knew what to expect.

“All right.” Words rise like they’re bubbling out of his own throat, fingers digging into soft flesh as he pulls away. “Let’s take a look at you.”

She was so focused on solving him like a puzzle she never noticed him doing the same, until he’d taken her apart piece by piece. She limply follows his guidance as she rolls onto her back. Takes him in by the slanted lamplight with a disgustingly self-satisfied smirk pasted across her face. He rests back on his heels, surveying her. It’s completely the wrong direction to be going in, but unwilling to actually sit up she just trails a foot along the side of his leg.

“Now aren’t you glad I didn’t leave?” His response to her coaxing is to lean forward, hands pressing down on either side of her. His face comes level with her stomach, picking a line of butterfly-light touches like he’s got to cover every square of her body with his mouth at some point or another.

He’s gotten up to her breasts when he murmurs, “But you will,” like either of them need reminding of that, especially at this point in time. She sighs impertinently.

“Are you incapable of letting yourself be happy for even a moment?” Looking down in exasperation she finds his eyes soulful. Yes, they answer. Softening, she reaches a hand for him and runs fingers back from the high arch of his hairline. “I know,” she acknowledges gently. Exerting only a little force, she guides him up until he’s directly over her, face level with her own. “But won’t you just… enjoy it?” It’s seizing a different kind of moment, but seems to be something he’s woefully inexperienced with. Too serious for his own good.

“Not sure I know how.” She can’t deny that it’s more than a little satisfying to have the student become the teacher in this respect.

“I can help you,” she replies in a parody of the way he’s spoken to her before, “- right now, in
fact.”

She’s already made room for him between her legs, so it’s terribly easy to link them behind his waist as she gently tugs his mouth onto hers. Gets lost in a kiss. Their alignment such that it doesn’t even take a guiding hand for him to slide back into her, mutual exhales as the delicious contact returns with no more than movement of his hips over hers. Sounds muffled into each other’s mouths.

There’s an intensity to the position that hasn’t anything to do with the physical sensation. Just having him right above her, feeling small as he moves slowly at first. His lips twist off hers and they rest temple to temple, riding a hand on his shoulder as she shifts on her back. Lifts up just as his weight comes down each time.

She looks down and takes herself in laid out underneath him, length disappearing into her in a way she can actually see that makes it all seem so real. Draws her eyes slowly up the tapering trail of hair to his stomach, traverses scarred plains of tanned skin with a little looseness from his age. Still defined over an undeniably pleasing form – the breadth and shape of shoulders holding him over her. She shudders with the reality of it all, clenching around him and making a quiet pleased sound as it pulses through her.

“You’re certainly enjoying yourself,” he notes, moving back enough to catch her eye.

“You’re not the only one who likes to watch,” she replies. A cheeky shot at his voyeuristic tendencies. And deviant enough that he gives a harder thrust, and she gasps a pleased noise.

Lifting away further to meet her gaze at a more comfortable distance, she wonders if this isn’t why he kept her facing away from him at first. It’s so much, looking right at him without breaking the rhythm rolling in and out of her like waves on a shore – but he doesn’t look away, so neither does she.

Although there’s no rush and he’s hardly set a precedent of hurrying, the pace picks up pleasingly. Nothing much for her to do but lay back and enjoy it, fingers digging into the tense muscles of his shoulders. However, he at least proves to be human after all, when his forehead comes down to touch against hers and he stills for a moment.

“Not gonna last much longer,” he gives like confession. She trails a couple of fingernails lightly across his skin.

“Is that your way of telling me you want to come?” she queries with a disproportionate amount of decorum for such an inquiry. Then feels him shudder and throb within her when she clenches pelvic muscles intentionally.

“Yes,” he just about groans, breaking down fully when she rolls onto the tips her fingers like drawing claws. Digs her nails into his shoulders.

“Well, where are your manners?” His face comes to rest alongside hers before turning into her neck, where hot breath cloys over her skin. If he gets to play power games with her when they start it’s only fair she gets to finish with them. “Yes what?”

It takes him a moment to consider what she’s asking for, but even like this he’s got to realise what she’s after – not a term of address, like gets him off. Something else that has power when the word actually graces his unwilling lips.

“Yes… please,” he manages. She flexes around him ecstatically, tightening the circle of her legs to
pull him deeper.

“Good,” she affirms in that tone she learned from the best, then flattens a hand to run soothingly from his shoulders up to the back of his neck. Holds him close as she drags her mouth to his ear.

“What are you waiting for?”

That sets him off. He pushes a hand behind her neck, staying claustrophobically close as he quickens into a rhythm that has her writhing and moaning under him. Just holds on tight and stumbles through another climax before he can even get to one.

Emily almost knows the chain non-verbal sounds when he’s almost there. Building recognition of the signs that reduce her surprise at the sudden withdrawal and substitution of his hand. This time she at least has light and wherewithal enough to watch the way he pulls himself to completion – how delightfully graphic the obscenity is.

However, last time he was underneath. While she’s encountered plenty of erotic literature that covers the ‘spilling of seed’ over just about anything, it doesn’t quite prepare her for the surprising reality of exactly how sudden, warm and wet it is all at once. A hot streak cooling slowly across her skin as he sags over her like a pneumatic with a leak.

“You’re incredible,” he tells her, for no discernible reason other than he can.

“So I’ve been told.” She suspects she might just have fooled him out of his habitual misery for a moment, because he lapses into a gentle smile and leans in to kiss her.

“May I smoke?” she proposes after a lacklustre clean-up. Yet more clothing has been condemned to being washed before worn again to re-enable her free range of movement.

“You want to smoke?” Daud queries like he can’t believe it, laying on his side beside her. Looking like he’d fall asleep if he could stop staring at her for a moment.

“I’m partial after enjoying myself,” she describes coyly. He makes a sound that might have been a chuckle if he hadn’t already expended most of his energy.

“In the case on the desk.” She gets up and crosses the room stark naked, picking out the metal case she’d long suspected of containing smoking paraphernalia by the dim light and clicking it open. It contains slim cigarillos, a little more dainty than what the trader puffed near-constantly. She plies one out, sets it between her lips then turns around and comes back, making sure to take stock of him watching her approach. Basks in his gaze.

She perches on the edge of bed and leans over to kindle the end on the lantern that still burns on the nightstand, sitting up as she inhales and blows a plume of smoke upwards. The slow crawl of his eyes finally makes it up to hers as she’s taking another drag, and she smirks. A little pout as she exhales even, then plucks the cigar from her mouth and offers it to him.

He raises a hand to accept it, pinching the end between thumb and forefinger as he brings it to his lips and takes a pull to shame her. The cloud he blows out almost swallows them whole. His arm extends over her after a second drag to flick ash on the floor – she’d been wondering what to do
about that – and then gives it back to her.

She stalls just before setting it back to her lips. “I wanted to ask,” she remarks, pausing to inhale and paying attention the way he watches her. There’s hint of concern that seems to come from the unknown promise of questioning. Still the same man, even stripped bare literally and metaphorically speaking. “What did the Outsider mean when he said…” she bottles the quote she was going to use with a breath out, and takes something a little further from the bone instead, “that I don’t realise how special this makes me.”

“It’s hardly normal.” He reaches out to invite the return of the cigar again.

“But he didn’t mean it like that.” It didn’t need saying that laying naked as sin in bed with her mother’s assassin sharing a post-coital smoke is hardly the product of ordinary reasoning, but here she is all the same. It’s not her own mindset on the matter that puzzles her. “It was about how ‘these things don’t just happen’ for you, or something like that.” As much as she tries to remember the exactitudes of the exchange, they become hazier with every passing moment, like trying to hang onto a handful of fine sand. Passes across the cigar and watches the lined purse of his lips around the end as he inhales.

“That’s what you came away curious about?” he comments hoarsely, smoke curling around his lips as he holds the breath before exhaling.

“Amongst other things.” She twitches her fingers for the fragrant cigar to be returned before his greedy drags burn it up completely. He sighs, then as tentatively as if he’d not been fingers and much more deep in her… however long ago it was, lowers a hand to trace an almost curious touch along her side.

“I don’t usually do this.”

“You’ve hardly had opportunity.” She could ask for specifics, but it’s obvious enough.

“Before here,” he says, still eyes to her abdomen where he outlines the shape of her muscles with a fingertip. “It’s rarely interested me.” When his eyes flit up to hers he finds a sceptical stare waiting for him. “For its own sake.” Every word out his lips is paced like it needs deep consideration, before she concedes to offering the cigar back to him.

“So what does that mean?” She’s not entirely sure what he’s trying to tell her. He certainly seemed interested at the time.

“Just that you-, what you do to me, is very…” he pauses to pull on the smoke, or maybe does so because he’s looking for the words, “unexpected,” he finishes on a held breath, then carefully purses his lips to blow a series of rings that roll through the air, much to her delight.

“It was rather a surprise to me too,” she chats, putting a finger through one of the smoke rings. Now it’s his turn for a disbelieving look. “What?” she defends upon taking the cigar back. Meanwhile the touch of one finger against her has turned into four, half a palm to a span of her stomach.

“You woke me up in the middle of the night just to plant a kiss on me at that door.” His eyes flick sceptically from her to the threshold where it’d happened. “What did you think was going to happen?”

“I was proving a point,” she argues, though the thought now is rather like mixing acid and alkaline in her gut – how had she managed that without considering this?
“Which was?” he prompts sardonically.

“That I wasn’t afraid of doing it.”

“Don’t remember suggesting you were afraid,” he says. “Believe I asked you where it ends.” That much is clear now, though she certainly hadn’t the foresight to see it at the time.

“You said not to load a weapon if I couldn’t pull the trigger,” she quotes with an accusing prod into his shoulder, end of the cigar still trapped in the corner of her mouth. He carefully reaches over to take it from her lips, sucking a final breath before stubbing on the wall and tossing through the nearest window.

“I truly underestimated how far you were willing to go to spite me,” he concedes. She feigns outrage for a moment, though it’s ultimately true so lets the comment pass.

“When did you start-” she breaks off, hardly understanding why it’s so difficult to get all these things twisting around in her head into coherent sentences. “By then, had you already thought about… this?”

“No,” he answers surely, “but I’d looked.” The guilty admission is a delight to hear. “That was trouble enough.”

“When?” He gives her a recalcitrant stare.

“Haven’t you had enough flattery for one night?” It’s an empty taunt, because by now his entire hand is against her.

“Is that what you call it?” she jests. “And never.”

“When we went up to the lake.” He gives up, withdrawing his hand to settle over his eyes like he’s blotting out the image in front of him for another. “So help me at the sight of you soaked through.”

“Is that before or after you tried to kill me?” she teases, but his look treats it as real.

“After.” He’s painfully serious. “Especially when you… it didn’t help, the way you were. Are.”

“All that distraction.” She finds his disapproving stare most comfortable. “Now, was that so damn hard?” She’s teasing, pushes up on her elbows to close the space between them, shifting her weight onto one side. Her head lolls just under his, practically daring him to lean in and kiss her.

“Watch your language.” Then as if it hasn’t been like pulling teeth to get to this point, he drops to deliver the kiss she’s posturing for. Gets caught on her lips like a honey trap. Though his arousal has definitely subsided, it’s not yet dormant. So when the contact lingers she takes her free hand for a probing grasp that lifts his mouth off hers with a gaspy noise.

“You’ll wear an old man out,” he warns, but then has his lips to hers again anyway.

“Doesn’t feel that way from here,” she counters between increasingly deliberate kisses. Then she hesitates, finding herself thinking of earlier today; how her enthusiasm caused her to misinterpret his investment. “I… you can tell me to stop, you know.” It’s a little awkward, but he just strokes a warm hand up her side. Follows with a dusted peck on the lips, perhaps in acknowledgement that she’s checking.

“Do as you want with me,” he devotes.
“Oh, in that case.” Without further ado she wriggles down the bed until her head is level with his crotch, an incomprehensible noise escaping him as she supplements her ministrations and kicks the whole wicked thing off for another round.

Emily doesn’t wake alone this time. Coming to as early light shines through the windows, Daud warm and inescapably real underneath her. Splayed arm and leg across him as he sleeps on his back, her cheek tucked next to his shoulder. She’s perfectly content and wouldn’t even be conscious if not for his stirring underneath her – awake, though he’s not stolen away to leave her cold figuratively rather than literally speaking.

She twists an arm lazily around his. Her sleeping eyes flutter open and notice something peculiar, what look like straight lines inked across the back of her hand. Turning it toward her, she could almost be mistaken for thinking it’s an iconic symbol.

“That’s odd,” she murmurs. No sooner has she spoken than Daud is conjured into action. Takes her wrist and holds it up to inspect for himself, thumb brushing back and forth over her skin as if to see if it rubs away – it doesn’t.

“Shit.” He’s even hoarser in the morning, and she pulls herself from his grasp to inspect herself more clearly. It does look uncannily like a half-faded mark of the Outsider. “I feared this might happen,” he offers inexplicably.

“But I didn’t accept any-” she groggily starts.

“It’s not that,” he interjects, “It’s me.”

Chapter End Notes

Dum-dum-dum!!! Yep, I went there. About the Outsider mark, I mean. Also the sex.

Part of the reason this chapter was so long was that I wanted to end it where it ends, and they just kept... *talking* and stuff before then. Pillow talk and the 'so this thing between us' breakdown are essential to me, so no, I could not be parted from them. Managing to sneak in Daud talking about his lack of 'interest' in sex for pure sex's sake. When he's hopelessly into the person? Lil different.

I did up the rating with this chapter but then at the same time I'm not going to get too bent out of shape over the content because all the sexies portrayed here are extremely consensual (almost exhaustively so), full of communication and will I hope be understood to be an example of positive, good grown-up times between two adults. The ship is unconventional, of course, with a huge potential to be unhealthy and some of the previous interactions played with that, but this story was always meant to be about making something healthy out of a big ol' mess, so I just... hope I've done a convincing job. I definitely sold myself on it. *Fans self*
Til next week, sailors!


The Forty-Seventh Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily is still a student, and Daud a hands-on teacher.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for melting y'all last week. Sorry for melting ya again, cuz this chapter originally wasn't spicy in the first iteration, and then I was like WHAT IF SPICE? Y'all are welcome.

Warning: It's spicy.

OH! I almost forgot, last chapter I *finally* after almost 50 chapters of this, got my first hate in the comments! Isn't that amazing?!! Really, though. I'm not even joking I'm for reals serious. It only took 150k and 2.5 smut scenes. I guess last chapter would be a good one to click straight to and go omg grossss if you were that kind of person (a nitwit). I didn't delete it or anything, and honestly it was a thrill to get. I'd been expecting some hate since the good ol' days of finding random agro in the 'Daud' tag on tumblr (where this fic doesn't dare to treat lmao), but everyone's just been so darn super! Ohhhh you people, being so kind to me and this trashy fic. You're what makes it fun.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You?” Emily is shunted somewhat rudely upright when Daud sits up with her still halfway wrapped around him. “But, it looks like a-

“It is,” he interrupts with no manners for the morning. “One of my gifts from the Outsider was… is, the sharing of my powers with those who served under me.” He quietens as the magnitude of it sinks in.

“Wait.” She spares a comment about what kind of ‘working under’ for the time being. More pertinent considerations. “Are you saying I’ll be able to use the same powers you do?”

“Some of them.” Others being able to share his gifts would account for how reports in his heyday could place ‘Knife of Dunwall’ in separate places at the same time. A reminder of how effective his Whalers had been before their head was removed.

“And you only decided to do this now?”

“It’s not something I control,” he comes in a little sharp, but wavers when she gives him as cutting a look as she can manage naked in bed next to him. “Those around me either develop the abilities or they don’t,” he reveals more gently. “I’d thought that if you made it this far then perhaps it
wasn’t going to happen.”

“Could it have anything to do with my ‘audience’ with the Outsider last night?”

“Unlikely.” He holds a hand out for hers again, taking it as gently as if injured. “No one else who shared in my powers ever spoke with him, far as I know.”

“What about the rest of last night?” she says with a touch of naughtiness,

“That either.” With a sterner look he adds, “Don’t mix business and pleasure.” She’s not sure there’s much of anything he’s mixed with pleasure, as far as she can tell.

“Is that another lesson?” she taunts.

“Piece of advice for you,” he murmurs distractedly, like they’re not the same thing. Brushes his fingers again over the beginnings of the mark and she feels a quiver running through her. “Damn.”

“You’re treating it like a bad thing.” She feels weighty under his touch.

“And you as if isn’t,” he retorts.

He makes quite the picture, she thinks. Sat up with the bedsheet draped over his slightly crooked knees, cradling her hand between. Hair tousled at the back from where he’s been lying down.

“What?” he prompts with something that might be impatience, or perhaps just a severe case of the morning grouch.

“I’m sorry, are you the only one of us permitted to stare longingly at the other?” The disbelieving look he returns is equal parts amusing and sad, somehow. He releases her and trails a hand through his hair in a way that might almost be self-conscious, if she’d be so bold as to pin such a painfully human trait to him. “When will I be able to use them?”

“What?” he rumbles without looking to her.

“You seem awfully pleased about this.” His palm drops to rub a scratchy jaw.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” She sits up more fully, turning her hand in the light. “It’s quite the opportunity as far as I can see.” Use of powers granted by The Outsider without commitment is a win-win at far as she understands it.

“His gifts—”

“Aren’t for dabbling with?” she finishes for him. “Who says I plan to dabble? Or are you intimidated now your greatest advantage over me is about to be taken away?” He gives a scoff and settles his face in his hand, rubbing eyes and drawing fingers together to pinch his brow, seeming overly concerned by this development.

“Can all this wait until after some coffee?” he astonishes her by asking.

“Of course,” she blurts. “I didn’t mean to suggest it had to be right now.”

“Oh?” he remarks. “Don’t you usually expect me to drop everything to tend to your every need?” He’s so stone-faced that she’s one foot into an argument and the other in an apology before she sees his crooked eyebrow twitch, not quite lifting, and diagnoses the deadpan.
“Fine.” She gives him a playful shove, but it’s like trying to push a brick wall. “Then I’ll make the coffee, and we can start on my needs later.” Getting up, she snatches an unsoiled shirt off the floor. The one he was wearing last night, round-collared with a deep drop in the chest that she finds suits her just as well – if not better – than him. Though it’s not like she really needs clothes around here now. “But you better still be there when I come back.” Knowing him, he’d be on the other side of the grounds picking bloody peaches or something.

He lays back down with hands folded behind his head in so relaxed a way it’d almost make her think he planned it. “As you wish, highness.”

Daud is just about where she left him when Emily returns with two cups of coffee. He sits semi-upright in bed and looks outright pleased to see at least one of them – she fears perhaps the coffee moreso at this point in time. The stove was hot, so although he’s still here she deduces he must have gotten up to light the fire earlier in the morning. That he managed to do so without disturbing her is a tribute to his skills as an assassin she supposes, though she’s most impressed that he unquestioningly came back.

He takes the cup she offers him with a hum of gratitude, then she sets her own down and settles in beside him. Taps on his arm to indicate it should be lifted so that she might slot herself underneath. A gesture he accedes to without contest. She moulds to his side so contently it’s a little unnerving. How easily they’re able to fit together.

She’s well positioned to trail her eyes along the scar down the side of his face from this angle. Keeps going all the way down to the newest addition, the red and purplish formation of healing tissue around the wound she cut into him just weeks ago. A mark of her he’ll carry permanently.

“You did a good job,” he comments with an air of indifference as she draws a pensive finger over it. He blows on his coffee and takes a sip.

“At what, inflicting the damage or repairing it?” His fingers drum against the back of her hip.

“Both,” he answers with a surprising lack of coaxing. “That’s when I realised you were something else.”

“When I stabbed you?” She nudges one of her legs into his.

“Partly,” he admits. “It was impressive you managed it, but moreso that you could’ve left me to rot and didn’t.”

“Well, no,” she defers. “What good would it have done?”

“In letting your mother’s assassin bleed out on his own blade?” It’s somehow a monument to progress that he refers to himself as such. Doubly so to do it with her wrapped around him as intimately as this. “Nought but your own satisfaction.”

“Exactly.” She twists without fully extracting herself from such a comfortable embrace to reach for her own coffee. “Now I won’t deny it was a little satisfying,” she concedes over the edge of the cup, “but it was an accident, and besides which you weren’t even angry with me about it, so where’s the satisfaction in that?”

“Was my displeasure that important to you?” That he uses the past tense is the truer victory.
“Not exactly,” she replies cagily. “What I mean is, you practically seemed pleased, and where’s the satisfaction in hurting someone who wants to be hurt?”

“Ah,” he murmurs without an ounce of denial in sight. “So you had contradict me.”

“Right.” Such reasoning would certainly explain why if he’s been so set on misery she has to push him the other way in that respect too. She takes a sip of coffee and then rests her cup against him. It’s clearly too hot, because he hisses at her and she has to pick it back up.

“What about you?” She doesn’t follow, so resorts to a quizzical sound to convey her need for elaboration. “You’ve interrogated me enough,” he rephrases, “when did your… opinions change?” It’s a peculiar way to put it. However, he’s had enough difficulty accepting that she could want anything more than to torment him, so she can grant him a little leniency in the asking.

“Oh… well there was no one moment.” It was a thousand little things, most of which she never noticed until it was well past the point. “Though I suppose there was the fight,”

“Which one?” he mocks.

“The one where you told me ‘not liking it’ wasn’t the problem,” she harshens her tone into a mocking parody of his own. Even if it’d taken a long enough time to grow, the seed – that there was something in him that responded to her advances in a way that he didn’t want her to know about, not directly at least – was surely planted then.

“For all the good it did,” he disparages, “but you were still playing with me back then.” As close to the quick as it cuts, he’s not wrong. “When did it… mean something else?”

The silence that follows is excessively quiet. Emily swills her coffee around the cup, contemplating that after everything that’s happened between them. She can’t keep running away from addressing these things in words. No matter how foreign it feels to pull the thoughts out of her head and express them to someone else. He’s just as entitled to explanations as she is.

“The incident with the sleep dart comes to mind,” she answers meekly. When he’d first said her name in that way she can’t explain but loves to hear.

“Hm,” he practically purrs with deep vibrations of his chest. “Thought you might not have remembered all of that.”

“I certainly remember thinking you were going to kiss me,” she returns. “Right before you didn’t.” Fobbed her off with some nonsense about questions instead.

“Won’t deny it was tempting,” he admits throatily. “But what good would it have done?”

“It was barely a day until you did.” Although, a lot could and did happen in a day. Emily finds the cup of coffee in her hand more and more of a burden as she drags herself further over him. Daud watches her with eyelids hanging low and a blank expression that she knows now is indicative of plenty under the surface.

“And what good did that do?” he poses with a glimmer of a smirk on his lips. Unable to resist any longer, she leans in to cover them with her own. He tastes like coffee, as does she, though with a hint of sweetness from the sugar she didn’t neglect to add.

“See?” he adds when she pulls back. Emily passes her cup from one hand to the other to set it down on the side table, then without challenge reaches for his and does the same. The last words out his mouth before she stops it with hers are another soft, terribly fond rasp. “Nothing but trouble.”
It’s not long of deepening kisses and Daud’s wandering hands before Emily’s own are linked firmly behind his neck, chest pressing to his as she spreads her knees either side his lap and grinds. “Still after more?” he murmurs in a way that might be awe. She won’t deny some aches from last night, but is far from sated.

“You’re one to talk.” Especially when he’s got a handful of her rear guiding her movements against him with unmistakable intention.

“I don’t know how you do it to me.” His eyes drift shut, laying his cheek to hers with a breathy sound. Rolls instinctively against her with another raw noise. “It’s not… I’m never like this.”

“I’m not complaining.” She soon reaches between them to hold him in position. Works her way down, slicked fingers in her mouth when she needs them. Daud issues a sequence of noises that’d definitely make her want to do what she is if she wasn’t doing it already. She's tighter this morning, and just sore enough to wince a little when she moves in a way that had been perfectly agreeable yesterday.

“You all right?” he asks with hand to her face, following the movement of her head as she nods.

“Fine.” She’s arrested by the notion that he still can’t seem to stand hurting her, even like this. “It’s just… different.”

“Take it slow,” he says – of course he does – and strokes a palm up her back and down again. “There’s no rush.”

She nods again and he drops his other hand to her waist, then rocks her gently over him. It elicits a pleased noise from her. A squeak almost, at the sensation such restrained movement generates.

“Speak for yourself.” She focuses on relaxing as settles around him, small testing movements as she adjusts to new tenderness. It seems to do as many favours as inconveniences. “What if I don’t want to go slow?” Never had.

“Then you’ll have to be patient.” Though she pouts, the incremental roll of her hips continues undisturbed.

“Aren’t you supposed to drop everything to tend to my every need?” She lifts her head, like it’s not an open invitation for him to bring his mouth to her neck.

“Thought that’s what I’m doing,” he leans forward and rasps obligingly against her throat. “Easy,” he urges when she shifts her hips forward and back more assertively and makes a strangled pain-pleasure noise. “You’ll hurt yourself.” Spoken like the last thing he could ever want. Emily makes a frustrated sound, but as good as it feels she suspects he’s not wrong. For the sake of longevity, she concedes to restraining her pace.

The minute movements tend to a carefully winding tension, which rises up her until she’s moving more deliberately but no faster, eyes closed and focused on breathing as she locks down tighter around Daud. He makes terribly wanting sounds, but doesn’t stop her. Urging her to ride out the climax with nothing more than soft, strangled murmurs of encouragement. “Atta girl,” he practically congratulates as she stills, breathing heavy over him.

“If only you were so free with praise in the rest of your training,” she says with her head resting on the bough of his shoulder. The chuckle he gives jiggles her in his lap.
“Training you, am I?” He cups the back of her head under hair that is going to need serious brushing after the state it’s gotten into with all this tumbling around in bed, and guides her into a lingering kiss. “Then lie down,” he says over her mouth, holding her a whisker away from him before lapsing lips back onto hers.

She smiles against him, still endlessly thrilled when he gets instructive. Does as he pleases with her, because he’s a tragically human creature with needs and desires like any other. Yet who only wants her. As if she’s supposed to resist a trip like that. She compliments the noise he makes with one of her own as she slides up and they come apart.

“No,” he corrects when she’s about to flop onto her back. “On your front.”

“You want me face down? Again?” she queries as much as teases, but flips onto her belly nonetheless. Propped on her elbows as she watches him sit up and shift behind her.

“Hm,” he affirms with two fingers muffling his mouth. He settles a knee on either side of her thighs with her legs practically together. She doesn’t quite understand what he’s thinking of, but then is rather more distracted by the return of his hands to her. One to a buttock, pulling soft flesh up, while the other finds the centre between them. Dips a wetted finger into her. “How’s that?” She makes an appreciative sound, getting the gist as he works her a little more with his hands.

“Daaud,” she whines when it goes on longer than she’d like. He hushes her soothingly, weight sitting more heavily over the back of her legs as he adjusts position and sweeps the end of something much thicker than his fingers against her. It takes a little to get the angle right, but when he does push into her she gives a startled moan, his hands firm on her waist as he leans into her.

“See what I-” he chokes off as she pushes her hips up against the weight of him and hits a particularly sweet spot. “Fuck,” he gasps as he moves slowly in her, “that’s so good.”

“You’re telling me,” she spills in a tone that undermines rather than enhances her eloquence, lowering her forehead onto her hands. “I know you said there’s no rush…”

She breathes in against bedding that doesn’t seem to hold the inalienable smell of him quite so strongly anymore – not as something other to herself. That scent can only be taken directly from his skin now, the curve of his neck a particularly good spot to soak it in. Makes her wonder how someone’s smell alone – and this man, of all of them – can have such an impact on her. “But if you wanted to…” she trails off, hearing him breathing deeply behind her. His grip tightens for a moment, a throb inside her.

“Keep pushing up,” he drones groggily, and then another eloquent, “Fuck,” before he makes good on the oft-uttered pledge. A few curses of her own certainly slip past her lips as the dizzying pace begins.

Most of the coherent thoughts are dashed right out of her head from that point onward. Emily forgets anything that’s not how good it feels to be back in this moment – how incredible he makes her feel. Every jolt inside her and noise that comes between them only feeding the intoxication more. She arches her back and keeps her hips sprung against his weight, absolutely losing her damn mind face down in the bed as he must have known she would. At one point comes so hard she shuts him out, coming to an ungraceful stop as she rides out the end of a moan.

“Sorry,” she pants uncharacteristically as he finds her again.

“Don’t be.” A raw noise escapes his throat as he gets back inside her. “You’re doing great.” She should be so lucky to get such glowing appreciation from him in any other respect. Though she
might not enjoy it quite as much as she does the continuing pace of thrusts from this delicious angle.

“Please, Em,” he groans eventually. It’s remarkable in ways she can’t properly appreciate at the time that such a signal could be so freely and clearly conveyed with a word – and that word as well.

She doesn’t even use one to respond, just makes an affirmative noise. Still face-down to the bed, mostly preoccupied by riding out the debilitating waves he pushes through her until he pulls out, followed by the warming sensation that lands over her rear.

Is this really what we’ve come to? She thinks in a moment of astonished clarity. Then leans right down over her, thick arm bending by her side, and his lips press against the back of her shoulder. She forgets the rest.

“You have to stop doing that to me,” he rumbles over her bare skin.

“To you?” She picks herself up, rolling her shoulders as Daud backs away. He reaches for the latest shirt to be sacrificed to this role, sweeping it over her delightfully soiled skin as she just lays there. No complaints about doing things for her now. “Then what does that make me?” He leans back over her as he tosses the fabric aside. Face in the space next to hers, hanging over her shoulder. Stubble that scrapes her skin as he drags his lips along her cheekbone.

“A temptation,” he growls, pulling hair aside to nip her ear before he backs off to let her up.

“Hm.” She flips over and settles lazily in the groove she – or they, with his weight so surely on top of hers – made in the bedding. A feign of inspecting of her nails before she casts her eyes further across to where he watches. “A fate I suppose I’ll have to accept.”

As if it’s not exactly what she wants.

They finally get around to getting out of bed after dozing a while longer. Caught up in the post-coital afterglow of attending to her ‘needs’ and neglecting a couple of cups of coffee to go cold in the process. However, by mid-morning a new pot has been brewed and they’ve made it all the way out to the terrace, where her newest lesson – at least outside of the bedroom – is to commence.

“Let’s start with something simple.” Daud lifts his hand and blinks from by her side to the end of the patio without taking a step. He pieces away into the void in a fashion her father doesn’t, like being reduced to scraps of ash carried off on a swirl of wind.

“Simple,” Emily echoes sarcastically. “Of course.”

“The trick with traversal is that you’re still moving,” he tells her. “Just not through this plane.”

“A wonderfully illustrative explanation.” She props her chin on the knuckles of the hand. The same hand on which the Outsider’s mark is slowly but surely soaking into her skin like ink drying on parchment. He traverses again and then is standing right in front of her, the trick coming as naturally to him as the close and open of his heavily lined eyes. He holds her gaze and something else starts to happen, a tingling on the back of her hand like the mark isn’t stained with ink but branded.

“Feel that?” he asks as she lifts the hand. There’s a kind of light creeping around the edges, final corners filling out like he’s cementing the bond.
“I feel something.” She reaches out to pinch the front of his shirt then pulls it – and its contents – towards her. Until she can pick up his earthy smell, cut with something else as the power surges from him, like air around a wall of light. “So what am I supposed to do with it?” He lets her reel him in without changing his footing, a little stiff. As if he’s trying to remain professional.

“You decide where you want to be,” he finally gives in what she could easily call his bedroom voice – should she dare to name any such thing. Daud holds up his own hand in front of her, middle finger pressed to this thumb, “then cross the void to get there.” He snaps his fingers and is suddenly right behind her. “That's why they call it blink,” he continues over her shoulder. “Our eyes don’t stay open all the time, but just because something can’t be seen doesn’t mean it hasn’t happened.”

“You’re not helping.” The warmth on the mark has turned into heat, almost searing with his proximity, like he’s pushing the energy into her. Not the only circumstances in which he’s done something penetrative to her today.

“Focus on where you want to go.” The order echoes in her ear, then he names the goal for her. “The end of the patio.” She does, but in a sense of staring at it and wondering exactly how he supposes she’s going to get there. “You have to know that you’re going to get there,” he says like he can read her thoughts. “It’s the destination that matters, not the journey.”

She’s about to tell him he’s got it the wrong way around when his palm meets the middle of her back flat. Gives her a shove so hard she stumbles forward a step… and plunges straight through the void. When Emily’s feet finally land on solid ground with her stomach heaving, she whirls around to give him an earful only to find him watching her smugly from the other side of the terrace.

“What was that for?” she spits.

“Some people need a push,” he says with arms crossing over his chest. “You especially. Ah ah-” comes the scold as she’s about to storm back over to him. Definitely holding back a grin. “Return the same way you got across.”

Emily scowls through her focus, the back of her hand tingling like the burn of extreme cold. She visualises herself right in front of him specifically to wipe that smirk off his face, and in doing so shoves herself across the space between where she is and needs to be with a determined fury. Hurts through the void by the power of spite alone, and jolts to her feet a breath away from him.

“Good,” Daud says in that way of his. Where the ‘enough’ goes unsaid but is perfectly apparent. She swipes for him – a grab of truly indiscriminate intention, but he blinks away as easily as fluttering eyelids. He reappears further down the hillside, watching her with the same determined gaze that makes her want to do several radically contradictory things to him. He probably knows it, because all he does is offer in his infuriatingly amused drawl, “Now do it again.”

Chapter End Notes

This is probably the most gratuitous of the smuts I’ve written for this story, and I initially didn't have the detailed scene but ended up going back and adding it in on the basis of there being enough things in it for me to want to write it. For example, the
second hookup of the previous night is skipped over because it's just more of the same/similar sex as the previous night's scene, so I didn't really need to write it. I initially had a similar feeling about this scene, but then my head was like pssst but it's their first morning sex and pssst you can change the pace and pssst dealing with soreness/aches PSSST different positions/dynamics so yeah... it is what it is.

Also: always more discussion/analysis of how and when they started falling for each other. Look at Emily actually making words out of her feelings. I'm so proud of her. On a more serious note this kind of development is a big part of her takeaway from Daud in this story. He gets... well, it's quite clear what he gets, I think ;)

(EMOTIONAL CLOSURE GAWD)

That said, this isn't planned to be one of those fics where now they've hooked up (for reals/emotionally satisfyingly) it's just a 24/7 bunnyfuck-fest. Is sex now a part of their range of interactions? I think we've established that. But it's not the only thing going on, and you can trust there's plenty more coming up that will get in the way of it.

As ever... sorry I'm not sorry ;) See ya next week!
The Forty-Eighth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Things get physical. Moreso.

Chapter Notes

Woooooo this chapter is a bit long but also marks the loosely termed 'second volume' of this story. That's right. Second volume. Of three.

*faints*

Spicy level: mild.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emily wouldn’t be so bold as to say she’s *mastered* the powers granted to her through Daud’s mark in so short a time. Perhaps not even so bold as to say she’ll ever really get comfortable with the traversal ‘trick’ as he flippantly refers to it. However, she does at least go from being outright nauseous to only *mildly* sickened as she crosses longer and longer distances under his rigid tutelage. Suffice to say, she’s not a natural at it like he is.

Even with the ability to chase Daud at same breakneck speed he sets, and almost certainly because he can tell it annoys her, every time she gets within reaching distance of him today he jumps somewhere else. While it’s the last thing Emily ever would have anticipated being so frustrating, *not* being able to touch him is driving her even further into whatever insanity this place has permitted her to descend into.

“You’re not playing fair,” she accuses after he blinks between trees with a carrier of pears over his shoulder one too many times.

“*Fair?*” Daud concedes to staying nearby when she appears into the same pool of shade, though probably only because she keeps out of grabbing distance. She could be mistaken for thinking he’s enjoying being chased. “Thought I taught you better than that.”

“Well I mean that you’ve had a lifetime of doing this.” Emily hooks both hands over a low-hanging branch and dangles off it, stretching her back. She aches in the most unexpected places today – particularly from the waist down. “I can’t hope to catch you.”

“You won’t.” It’s not really arrogance that he confirms this with, because they both know he’s right. “But I still expect you to try.” She watches him carefully, soaks in the face she’s studied so well and could lose more time on yet. “That said, you’re still coming to where I am, instead of where I’ll be,” he lectures as Emily swings with a petulant expression from her hand-hold.
“I thought you gave me my lesson this morning?” she says cheekily, and watches the still warmth in his eyes as he gazes at her. He’s no doubt remembering what she refers to, hopefully knowing there’s no reason it can’t be repeated. It certainly doesn’t seem like he’s able to help himself – though neither can she for that matter.

“Different lesson,” he murmurs hotly. She seizes the ripest point of their flirtation to flit forward at him, only to find herself right on top of nothing. “Anticipation is everything in creating the proper conditions to act,” he advises from a few meters behind her.

Emily whips around on Daud with such intensity of feeling that she doesn’t even think about her intention upon raising her newly marked hand to him. Her wish is simply to get him under her grip. Except rather than moving herself, she brings Daud to her, activating a different power – one he’s used only once and at her insistence – to pull him to her like she’s dragging him out of deep water on the end of a whaling harpoon.

She’s shocked enough to drop her hand as soon as she realises what’s happened, but not before sucking him a good deal of the way. No sooner does one power fade than something else happens to her. It’s not like the pull, more like traversal, but Emily doesn’t choose it. It feels like being torn from one spot to another, and before she’s even fully slipped back between dimensions feels herself being thrown onto the ground. Comes to flat on her back, with Daud scowling over her, hands either side of her shoulders.

“I didn’t mean to do that,” she rushes to defend herself. She knows by her own experience, if not the look on his face, how awful it is. She’d outright collapsed the first and only time he’d used the pull on her, and she doesn’t imagine it’s something that’s been done to him very often.

“It’s fine,” he says like it absolutely isn’t. “Just don’t do it again.” Even now, still, the direct order rankles. She’d clearly done it by accident, and he’s the one who granted her these powers – however unintentionally – in the first place.

“Ever?” she challenges out of some innate instinct to test rules wherever he sets them down. “What if there are extenuating circumstances?”

“Such as?” he prompts cruelly, still holding himself over her with a frown that has too many origins to trace in its entirety.

“Well… I’m sure it’d be evident at the time.” His expression is still the wrong side of cross. It’s a nasty thing to do to someone, she knows, but she hadn’t meant to – even if it had kind of worked – and he has to know that, so it frustrates her to be scowled at like it’s her fault.

Although, she reasons, struggling against the current of her own thoughts – knowing that she hadn’t done it intentionally didn’t make the experience any less unpleasant. And all she’s done is quibbled with him about the terms in which she could do it again.

“I’m sorry,” she offers belatedly, and the fading irritation in his face makes her think it’s exactly what she’d been missing. Enough to dare with a tentatively lighter tone. “Should I kiss and make it better?”

“Hm,” Daud murmurs just unambiguously enough for Emily to put a hand to the back of his neck – it’s a silly line, but the intention behind it less so. He comes down a little as she moves up, meeting her half-way in a remarkably soothing peck. It doesn’t lead anywhere, for once, then he backs away to let her up.

Even with amends made, Emily notices a subtle shudder shaking Daud as he gets to his feet that
she might take as her fault, if she’s in the business of accepting blame. But that he holds out his hand to help her up makes her a little more willing to shoulder responsibility she’d otherwise be reluctant to acknowledge.

“What happened?” As Emily sits up and takes his warm hand, a set of shivers all of her own run amok through her system. “After I pulled you, I mean. I didn’t think I… but I still moved through the void.”

“Another trick of the arcane bond,” Daud explains as he hoists her to her feet. “I brought you to me.”

“Why?”

“Force of habit,” he answers. “Sorry about flooring you as well.” Emily finds herself doubtful he’d offer any such apology had she not done so first.

She’d thought perhaps the bond had resulted in her ending up on her back, but with more time to piece together the jagged sensations realised she’d felt his hands on her while she was still in the void. That without thinking Daud had grabbed her within it and thrown her down for what she did to him. It strikes her just how intimidating an employer he would have made, back in the day.

“I’m not usually of a mind to complain about you pinning me to the ground.” She tries to lighten the mood, though still not feeling quite right in her skin. “I’m unlikely to start now.”

“Give a man some time to recover before you start on that,” he entreats, going back over to the spilled fruit carrier. For once he doesn’t prefix it with ‘old’, which she interprets as a sign of progress.

“I’ve an idea.” She watches him return to the peaceful harvesting that he’s been trying to get on with, when not aggravating her by being unreachable. “Though you might not like it.”

“What has that ever changed?” Daud starts putting spilled pears back into the toppled carrier. “Tell me.”

“I want us to fight again.”

“Fine.”

“Because I’m finally able to—”

“I said fine.” She realises that he did.

“Oh,” she says. “Really?”

He looks up at her, a pear in-hand. “You seem surprised.”

“It’s just… I didn’t expect you to agree so easily.”

“I’ve a couple of conditions.” He fixes her with a competitive look. “First, you bring your best game.”

“If you do too.”

“Done,” he grants without a moment’s consideration. “Second.” The sincerity of his look is wrenching. “It’ll be the last time.”
To coin a phrase, that one floors Emily. Because she knows without question what he means. That it’s her last chance to fulfil the promise she made to beat him before she leaves, and there’ll be no rematches if she can’t do it.

“I… very well,” she settles in spite of a turbulent sinking in her stomach.

He looks at her with a terrifying melancholy. “You better go prepare.”

Emily changes for the fight, or puts on a pair of trousers at least. Unmutilated ones that Daud had once grabbed a gratuitous handful of her posterior in. While such remembrance might be an added bonus to her choice of dress, the intention isn’t distraction. It’s about keeping her skin intact should she end up on the ground, because if he’s really going to come at her without holding back – perhaps for the first and last time – then she needs all the protection she can get.

Emily arms herself with dagger and sword, then heads out onto the terrace and starts stretching – something much needed if she’s to bring her aforementioned best game. A few hisses escape her as she catalogues the multitude of ways she’s sore. A calling card of the action they’ve been up to until now without a raised fist. Something soon to be changed.

She’s got an ankle on the table, bending over her leg when she hears Daud stroll up. She doesn’t interrupt her routine even as he approaches, just listens to the programmed timing of his breath as he stops nearby. He’s close. Emily feels his hand come down across the small of her back, and exert minutely calculated pressure, putting more force into the stretch to help her reach further.

“Breathe out,” Daud instructs, and even if she sighs then it’s still the same thing. Emily exhales and lets him press her until she’s folded flat against herself. “Good to see you’re taking this seriously.”

“I expect the same in return,” she says stiffly. Yet his touch goes from instructive to affectionate, palm trailing up the length of her back.

“Then you better earn it.” He leaves her to head inside and make his own preparations. They don’t take long. Daud comes back out armed, a single sabre in his hand – all he needs.

“Are you ready for this?” he asks as Emily stands across from him, swinging her sword in whirling movements as she loosens her wrist.

“Are you?” She’s taking a step in the opposite direction for every one he takes around her. They already started before he even set foot out here.

“Always.” That’s all it takes; Daud blinks forward but she’s ready to block, responding to his opening swing without moving her feet. As ever, she’ll give him no ground without being forced.

“You already helped me warm up,” she quips as he falls back a step to avoid the wind-like whip of her rapier. “Spare the introduction.” Daud gives a twisted smirk and then is on her again, this time with something actually challenging. However, she’s still got range on him, and they remain evenly matched as they rotate step over crossing step trading blows.

It’s pure fencing at first, an exchange they’ve had before, then things get interesting. He comes at her with a blink into a bull-like charge that invades her space faster than she can get the point of her sword in the way of, edge of his sabre swinging for her chest.
Emily can’t get out of range quickly enough on her footwork alone, so goes backwards exactly where she is. She drops as his blade passes over the top of her, one arm steadying herself on the ground as she arches her back. Then she kicks hard for his hand. Knocks the handle of Daud’s sabre out of his grip, then flips all the way over herself backwards and comes onto her feet again. The move disarms him, but only temporarily. No sooner than the sword has left Daud’s hand, he’s snatching it back with a roaring snarl of his powers.

“You said not to use that,” she points out.

“On me,” he specifies as they fall back into trading blows. Even going all-out like this, that move is a match ender, and she suspects wouldn’t be in her favour.

The next round almost goes in Daud’s favour. He knocks her rapier out of her hand like he’s been able to do it all along. Without questioning Emily snatches the blade back out of the air, tethering it back to her with a rush of void magic she hardly has to think about compared to traversal.

“Good,” he compliments, but she scowls.

“You’re testing me,” she seethes. “I thought you were going to stop playing around.” Things he once said to her, though under rather different circumstances.

“Then challenge me,” he replies obnoxiously. “This isn’t a contest for points at a tourney.”

Emily lets a frustrated noise escape her, a habit of vocalisation that seems to be catching on. Yet she knows what he’s picking at, so comes at him next time without the reserve of her more formal training.

She’s not trying to prove her technical merits to him, she’s trying to win. It means she has to come at him rawer, chaining quick blows together and discarding the ‘proper’ form or aesthetic appeal. At an opportune moment Emily whips out her dagger and uses it to lever his sword out of his grip. No sooner does she disarm him for the second time than with a pull of the void he rips her sword from her hand into his. She hadn’t expected him to pluck it straight from her fingers.

Emily flips Daud’s sabre in the air and gets it into hold just before he comes at her again, this time with her own sword. While she’s got two weapons, he’s got hers. And when he blinks unexpectedly around one of her swings, twisting her arm in his free hand and plying his sabre back like she was just holding onto it for him, he’s soon got both.

While she can’t hope to reach him with two swords to a dagger, she can get close enough to make the lack of range an advantage. With greater care about what she’s doing than before, Emily raises a hand and blinks right in front of Daud. She brings the point of the dagger up under his chin, only for him to vanish as she executes one of the moves he’s drilled so thoroughly into her. Though not the only thing.

As Daud reappears, Emily watches him toss her sword over his shoulder with an undeniably smug look. “Now that you definitely did on purpose.”

“It’s still too light.” Daud swaps his preferred weapon into his dominant hand.

Emily can’t see her rapier anywhere down the gentle slope into the groves of trees, but decides to chance her luck on it anyway. She breaks into a run and then blinks past Daud before she gets too close, carrying on at full speed sprinting in the direction he threw it. It’ll be easier to find now than later if nothing else, and she doesn’t much like her chances against him without a weapon.

He predictably appears in her path as she barrels down the hill, but though he’s got his blade held
out in warning she doesn’t stop. Especially not when she finally catches sight of her own weapon on the ground nearby. Emily knocks the swing of his sword away with a well-timed chink of her dagger and springs off the ground, planting a boot in the middle of Daud’s chest as she launches herself off his surprised pushback. Flipping backwards as she shoves him off-balance, Emily gets in range to pull her sword back into her hand, then lands in front of him armed once more.

“And you wanted to skip the introduction,” Daud says as they reset to the same configuration as before.

“Didn’t want to wear an old man out.” Even if the term of address feels entirely at cross purposes with what she’s dealing with.

“We’ll see about that.” He comes at her again, attacks falling either side of tree trunks as they weave around the grounds.

Though the advantage is back to Emily with two weapons on one, Daud sees to that quickly enough when their hands get close at the end of an exchange. Wrapping his fingers around hers, Daud turns her wrist over and drives the point of the dagger into one of the trees. Stuck too firmly to yank back out without exposing herself, she must carry on fighting without.

Swordplay is increasingly killing time between the real fight at this point. Emily moves through a thrust that passes by Daud harmlessly. He lets her arm extend almost fully before curving his own around it, then locks her into him. Daud forces her to the ground on the force of her own bone structure, but she’s not going down without a fight. Emily kicks up her legs and lashes them around interconnected arms, throwing her whole body into the movement to bring Daud tumbling to the ground with her.

She lands a little better than he does, then gets on top of him before he can do the same to her. Knees pressing down on his wrists, straddled over his chest. She drags her eyes off an expression that promises a few kinds of trouble and locks onto the dagger stuck in a nearby tree. Raising her marked hand to it, Emily scowls with the exertion and even lets slip a noise as she pulls it free from the live wood and it pelts into her hand.

Before she can bring the blade down against Daud’s neck he bucks like a horse, not throwing her off entirely, but up far enough to get a hand out from under her leg and into her side. Daud shoves her over and rolls on top – but as he does the point of her dagger presses lightly into the space under his jaw.

About to proclaim her win – she’s pinned but also poised to drive a blade straight through his tongue from the outside, the last thing Emily expects is for Daud to move regardless. Especially not to press a hot mouth to hers, a clear intention of some other purpose entirely for his tongue. Except when she lapses into kissing back, he suddenly wrestles the weapon away from his chin, slamming it and her hand flat against the ground.

“That’s cheating.”

Daud lifts off her moderately later than he’d need to for purely practical purposes. She’s increasingly well acquainted with the satisfaction of having all that weight pressing down on her.

“Never stopped you,” he counters with a heat that shames the overbearing sun above their heads.

Emily’s not sure whether she’s more horrified that Daud would use such a trick on her, or that it worked.
He clearly thinks he’s got her where he wants her now. But it only lasts as long as it takes for her to bring a leg up – limber from thorough stretching with his assistance, no less – and slam a knee forcefully into his ribs. It knocks him back far enough for Emily to blink further uphill. She’s left her weapons behind and appears on her back like an upturned beetle, but it’s a fair price to pay to escape his overwhelming presence and the time it buys her to scramble back onto her feet.

Daud pursues her unarmed, coming all fists and scarred knuckles swinging for her as if they’re moving onto the hand-to-hand section of this final evaluation. It doesn’t make sense if he’s really trying to win, but when she blocks him with a forearm Emily stumbles back a step from a bolt of pain so sharp she cries out. It occurs to her that Daud’s choice might well be because it’s easier not to hold back this way.

He unfurls his hands from fists and holds them out in front of him, beckoning her with a provocative flap of his fingers. “How’s this old man doing now?” He’s enjoying this.

Emily charges at him with a determined grin, no more than a pace away when her feet leave the ground – though this time by her own choice. Daud catches the knee she sends into his gut before doing too much harm. But the elbow into the junction of his shoulder, not so much. He kinks with a hiss as she gets him right in spot she’s so wont to abuse. Nor is he prepared for the wave of kinetic energy as she swings her weight around him, tightening her arms around his neck and pulling him head-first down to the ground.

Though Emily has him in a headlock, she doesn’t take Daud’s arms fully into account. A mistake she learns the extent of when he sweeps one meaty arm and brushes her off her feet like she’s not supposed to spend that much time on them anyway.

Coming in close, she twists to face him and tries to get her ankles into the backs of his knees. He shifts her up him like resettling a pack, hands gripping her thighs as he slides her up him. This results in her legs wrapped around his waist like they’re not fighting at all – something she’s quickly reminded they are when he blinks them both and rams her still-disorientated into the back of a tree.

Daud presses against her like this is the end. He wouldn’t be untoward in thinking it, given he’s got her held to something firm – and the tree is pretty hard too. Except Emily’s still not done. Especially not when she’s so well positioned to shift forward and dig her teeth into the fleshy lobe of his ear. It drives a noise out of Daud that seems a little confused. Less-so the grunt when she slams her fist into his side and then pushes him away from her, getting a hand over his neck to lead the shove that concludes with a foot against his chest. Emily forces him off her like a piston and grabs a branch over her head to stop herself falling as he’s forced to let her go.

Emily gets her feet back on earth briefly, ducking a jab he throws almost out of anything better to do, then she rises into a sweeping kick. The momentum doesn’t stop when Daud catches her ankle, merely changing the direction of her energy as he swings her up and tosses her skidding across the ground – grateful for those long trousers now as she slides across the gritty earth.

She rolls over in a cloud of dust and flips onto her feet, staying low and sliding her marked hand forward as she locks eyes with him across the short distance between them. Soon to be even shorter. Successfully blinking in front of him, Emily swipes for nothing as Daud flits out of sight – anticipating her, she’s no doubt he’ll mention first change he gets. The elbow she drives instinctively behind herself meets the bowl of his palm. He catches her arm, twisting it up her back as his other hand settles carefully around her neck.

Emily’s heart races for too many reasons to divine from one another. Daud guides her against him, raising her chin with a forefinger as she arches backwards in his hold. In spite of the fluttering in
her chest, and less-fluttering sensation further down her body, she manages to pick up a foot and
stamp her heel down on his bare toes – sandals abandoned some way back – creasing him up with
a feral grunt. It weakens the hold enough for her to wrestle free and reach for his arm with both of
hers, holding tightly as she drops to one knee and throws him over her shoulder.

The bigger they are, the harder they fall she’d once been taught, and Daud is no exception when
the leverage of his own body works against him. He hits the ground in front of her with another
pained sound, one arm aloft still in her grip. Emily gets as far as twisting it along the inside of her
leg and lowering a knee to try and pin him.

Daud quickly overpowers her with strength that is somehow still deceptive – despite her detailed
knowledge of exactly what he looks like without a shirt – and slams her to the ground next to him.
Again, Daud rolls over her. But this time with limbs so tangled she ends up lying underneath him
with a leg bent over his shoulder. A position they both notice, as for a moment the whirlwind stills.

“Lucky I stretched properly,” she comments while he presses down firmer over. Watching him past
her own leg folded between them, daring him to do it – if he’s won already then it doesn’t matter,
tempts the wicked look in her eyes.

Either Emily’s getting better at breaking him, or he’s finally giving up on how much he’ll devote
to resisting, because the next moment Daud is kissing her with an arm bent alongside her head.
She’s had a few sparring sessions with people that took turns like this, but never with anyone who
was so clearly her equal in the ring – maybe even better, not that she’d ever admit it.

Rather than waiting until he’s adequately distracted, Emily also has to contest her own ability to
concentrate on anything that’s not exactly how good Daud’s weight feels on top of her. Much less
the increasingly familiar duelling pattern of their tongues, or exactly how much of an
inconvenience her long trousers seem like now as she lifts her other knee up to hook her leg around
him – and that’s definitely his crotch pressing against hers. It’s therefore, a while before she
musters the inclination and resources to knock his arm out from next to her. She swings her other
leg up past Daud’s other shoulder, closing the hold neatly around his neck and spinning with
enough momentum to flip them again.

Emily comes up with Daud’s head between her thighs and knees on the ground, but mistakes how
much of an inconvenience to him that is. He just rocks to sit up, taking her with him. Manages to
get all the way to his feet with her legs still crooked over his shoulders, albeit facing the wrong
way – or right, perspective depending. But Emily waits until fully extended then drops backwards
and hurtles for the ground, throwing him with all her weight and force combined.

Daud rolls out of the throw, getting away from between her legs and back onto his feet in a way
that means he quite possibly let her do it. She wheels back to the ground too and they turn to face
each other. Yet they have no sooner locked eyes than he raises a fist with his mark burning bright.
Emily blinks, but not by her own choice.

She’s unprepared to be summoned right at Daud’s feet with the newest power he’s revealed to her,
but doubly doesn’t expect him to reach a hand for her cheek and then blink the both of them. The
appear all the way up to the back wall of the house. The brickwork is warm against her back as she
gasps in and out of the void. But so is his breath over her lips, holding her in place this time not
with physical force, but by sheer merit of enjoying where she is.

Daud’s close enough that there’s the lightest brush of contact between moving lips as she asks,
“Are we still fighting?”

He could be carved out of a cliff face for how much he moves after that. “You tell me.” He seems
determined to protect the sliver of space between them even as he dusts her mouth with his breath.

Emily overwhelms her reluctance and snatches his marked hand off the side of her face. She twists it to lock his arm and flips them so he’s against the wall instead of her. His teeth bare as the pressure of joints seizing together shoots through him.

“I think that depends if I’ve won or not,” she says. They could have each won and lost this fight a handful of times by now, and Emily finds she doesn’t really care for the technicalities so much. Not that it’s going to stop her trying to make him admit it.

Daud could use his other arm to stop what she’s doing, or retaliate in a more combative way. But his choice is to keep his free hand exactly where it is against her face, drawing a thumb across her dusty cheek. A sacrificial rasp throws her totally off-kilter. “You had me beaten the day you walked up.”

Emily releases his arm from the lock but keeps hold of Daud’s hand, pressing it into the wall. Her mouth crashes down over his like a breaking wave. This is the big one, the swell that finally sweeps them off their feet.

Something between the heat, fighting and this kiss is making her dizzy, but it doesn’t really matter given the way his hand is slipping from her face to behind her head. Daud rests against the wall of the house, holding her to him, sun warming her back as it all falls apart. Emily shifts her hand off his wrist to take hold of his shoulder. His arm settles low around her waist, ensuring she keeps pressing into him just so.

Then she tightens her fingers in the muscle of his shoulder and pulls, flipping their position one more time so suddenly she’s got her back to the wall with him all around her. Throwing herself under him, because the fight’s clearly over. Yet he pulls away in the motion, to give her a curious look.

“For the shade,” is her explanation, which is at least partly true. Daud scoffs and sinks back into her, a leg shifting between hers. If even he’s at such a stage then there’s surely no sense left between them.

Emily’s stomach flips when he reaches between them and plies apart a button of the shirt she’s wearing – still technically his – to trail rough fingertips across her breastbone. She closes her grip tighter into the meat of his shoulder and just pushes her chest into his hand. His fingers sink to the next button and push it free as well.

“So much for wearing you out,” she manages to slip out when her mouth isn’t otherwise occupied. Namely, when his is busy dragging a messy path from her jaw up to her ear.

“Bedroom,” he pants into her ear.

“Why?” She unashamedly grinds against his leg.

“I’d think you’d know by now.” There’s a growing pressure in his voice as well in his body on hers, hand now slipped fully inside her shirt to clutch around a breast, a soft noise escaping her as he does.

“I mean, why go all the way back there?” She turns her head to one side as he moves in to make an even more sensory mess of her neck. “Seems to me we’re doing just fine where we are.” His grip tightens around her breast, flirting with the threshold of pain so quickly that she’s no sooner made a desperately needy sound than it’s passed.
“You want me to fuck you here,” he puts into the curve of her shoulder, clammy breath over skin wet from his mouth, “against this wall?” Sweat, dirt and spit bedammed.

“Well when you say it like that.” She arches against him with a deeply enthusiastic sound, but feels his smile against her in premonition of a chuckle.

“Sounds more appealing than it is.” The next button on her shirt slips undone without much manipulation, straining against itself as his hand sweeps across her chest from one side to the other and pulls the opening further apart. “We’ll be more comfortable in bed.”

“Comfortable isn’t my greatest concern at present,” she replies rather primly for an Empress getting her neck sucked, digging her nails into him where she gets purchase. “Rather, you fucking me post-haste is.”

Daud lets out a raw noise, perhaps at the profanity she’s only reiterating from him in the first place. The hand behind her neck moves to her fastened hair and tightens into a grip that almost pulls if she wasn’t already leaning into the action.

Before his lips can cover hers – which is the route they’re very much headed for – Daud freezes in a way that’s not about teasing or games. Emily pauses too, searching for what’s set him off when she picks up the unmistakable sound of footsteps nearby.

As their eyes meet it seems to occur to them about the same time that he’s still got a hand inside her shirt. He whips it out just as she hurriedly starts to shove the buttons back into their proper place. Luckily there’s no mark of the spot where she was grinding so eagerly against his leg.

“Any idea of who it is?” she asks. If the suspicion on Daud’s face wasn’t enough to go on, the subtle shake of his head confirms it.

“Stay there,” he says softly, moving a little to the side on silent footsteps. He reaches through the kitchen window and pulls a couple of knives from the rack inside, pressing one into her hand as he passes without need for explanation. Emily grips the handle tightly, and Daud reaches the corner of the house around the time the foreign footsteps come onto to the terrace.

What follows confirms two things; that Daud knows who the mysterious visitor is; but he wasn’t lying about not knowing until that point. Because what she hears is his rough cadence shaping around a single name in complete surprise.

“Thomas?”

What the unknown voice says thereafter takes Emily totally off-guard. Dread plummets like a lead weight straight through the floor of her stomach.

“Corvo sent me.”

Chapter End Notes

OHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHO-OH-yeah. Gotcha (I hope).
I watched a lot of fight scenes coming up with this one, so special thanks to Zoe Saldana who has done the genre a true service in her tireless portrayal of hardass ladies who beat the shit out of men on screen.

Special cookies to allsilverone whose comments last chapter about using the arcane bond made my lazy/guilty ass make the effort of working it in (which happened to fall into this one anyway). I clearly need to be made accountable for these things.
The Forty-Ninth Lesson (end Vol 2)

Chapter Summary

Real life catches up.

Chapter Notes

Speaking of real lives, I quit my job like last week (HAH) and will be moving back home to the UK and looking for a new one of those things. The only change it'll have to updates most likely is that I'll put up next week's a day early as I'll be on a plane all of Friday. What joy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So many questions and feelings compete for prominence in Emily’s head that a choice ends up being made for her by merit of not choosing. She does nothing. Moments ago her greatest concern was the location of her and Daud’s next carnal encounter, and now with just three words reality has come crashing back down.

The next things out of the stranger's – at least to her – mouth aren't any better. Not least for the current of suspicion that’s totally unwarranted.

“Where’s the Empress?”

“Right here.” Emily fixes her hair and then haughtily rounds the corner of the house, spurned into action and hoping that Daud’s attention hasn’t left any noticeable marks on her neck. He’s a little way in front of her, just as mute as she’d been moments ago. Emily eyes the man before them, who looks terribly warm in such heavy Dunwall layers. “And you are?”

“My old second,” Daud answers without turning to her. Wise, given she’s no idea how they’d manage to look at one another without thinking of what they’d be doing about now if not for this interruption. Had they been against a different wall of the house, there would’ve been no cover what was about to happen before this stranger walked up.

“One of them,” Thomas, as Daud had called him, stiffly replies. The tension between the two is palpable.

“A Whaler under orders from my father?” Emily's attempt to feign surprise is half-hearted at best. Her Royal Spymaster as well as Lord Protector could use a lesson or two of his own about keeping his activities more covert.

“Someone Corvo could trust with finding me,” Daud supplies gruffly. Emily supposes it would be inadvisable to send someone he doesn’t know. Who might not make it back.
“To find the Empress,” Thomas says in a way that’s almost bitter, then reaches into an open jacket that’s far too thick for this climate to withdraw a sealed letter. “I was asked to deliver this.”

Emily takes it from his outstretched hand and tears the softened wax bearing her father’s seal, scanning the familiar handwriting contained within.

Emily,

Against my better instincts I have taken no news to be good news. Patient as I am prepared to be, your absence in Dunwall is getting more difficult to excuse the Court and Parliament, who are increasingly restless in their speculation.

Though we did not discuss the duration of your residency, which I hope has proven rewarding in spite of your initial misgivings, I did not anticipate your being away for so long. Certain matters of State are becoming pressing in your absence, and would be much helped by your timely return.

Corvo

P.s. The cat terrorises us more and more daily.

Emily folds the paper again with traces of a smirk fighting the rising dread coming up on her like floodwaters. Something not helped when Daud turns enough to catch her eye, and she swears as sure as she’s known the meaning of any of his looks, the one he gives her now is worried.

About what? She asks herself; the contents of the letter, what Corvo may or may not know by this point? Or perhaps something much worse than any of them.

“Thank you.” Emily raises a hand and realises belatedly that she’s no pocket to slip the letter into, so is instead poised to slide it into her shirt much in the same way as Daud’s hand had been short minutes ago.

The respective gazes as she salvages the motion alert her to the fact that she’s being waited on for more than her brief response. Thomas particularly is staring at her like she’s expected to leap into action – to start packing her bags, even. All she can think is not yet.

“You’ll stay a night, I suppose,” Daud suddenly remarks.

“Well-”

“Of course,” she says forcefully over Thomas, who stops with a perplexed look. “I’ve no intention of joining the mad dogs and Gristolmen in this heat,” she jokes in a way that’s entirely put-upon. If Daud notices the reference a reaction never graces his countenance. “Besides, you must be tired from the trip.”

“Oh… well, yes,” the man who was once Daud’s second in command replies uncomfortably. “I suppose a night’s rest wouldn’t hurt.”

Emily doesn’t like the way he says that at all, and wonders if this mission was supposed to be delivery or collection. She catches Daud’s eye with a sharp look, current shooting between them carrying signals that she hopes he understands.

“Take any room upstairs,” Daud offers somewhat coarsely. Emily can practically see the walls that’d taken so long to bring down going back up brick by brick, the only variation in the pattern being when he adds with a facsimile of due respect, “Aside from the Empress’s, of course.” Emily has to hope that Thomas isn’t sharp enough to notice her face drop when he says that last part and
realises the implications.

“I’ll show you up there,” she offers, catching a sly look from Daud for the intervention. Though he holds his tongue as she leads the way indoors with the clear expectation that Thomas is to follow her. Not one to deny an Empress – a habit that’s far more unique to the man of the house than anyone else – Thomas obligingly falls in line and walks after her as she passes through the kitchen and down the hallway.

Emily waits until they’re at the foot of the stairs before tuning on him. “How did you find—” she almost says ‘us’ in a reversal of fates that would be amusing if not so terrible, “this place.”

“Same as your majesty, I imagine,” he replies. “Lord Protector Corvo gave me a map.”

“Oh course he did.” Her demands continue as they climb the stairs. “What did he tell you about my presence here?”

“That you were… training under my former employer,” Thomas answers after a little hesitation, not knowing how many ways he’s right about that. “Though I didn’t really believe it until I saw him.” The subtle way he speaks of Daud ignites something intensely selfish in Emily, like it’s a threat for anyone to refer to him so reverently. That it could be intolerable for others to have knowledge or a claim to him, even though she knows he must have trusted this man to have worked so closely with him.

“The first door is mine,” she says without meaning it at all. After so much struggle to claim an amicable place in Daud’s bed, she’s hard pressed to give it up, as sensible and necessary as it is to maintaining appearances. “Take any other room with furniture.” Thomas sets uncertainly down the hallway. “One more thing,” she adds impulsively. “What else did Corvo ask of you, aside from delivering this letter?”

“To assist your majesty however required,” he answers diplomatically.

“Cut the rhetoric.” The bite to her tone seems to take him entirely by surprise. This must be an uncommon way to behold an Empress, she acknowledges, but uses it to her advantage. Keep him out of his comfort zone, struggling for footing and revealing things he ought not to out of uncertainty. “What else?”

“… That I should deliver the letter and accompany you back to the capital.”

“That’s better.” Emily turns a frosty shoulder. “I’ll leave you to settle in.”

She returns downstairs to find Daud in the kitchen fiddling with the knives that have taken a pointless trip around the outside of the house. She’s barely crossed the threshold before he mutters, “I don’t like this,” in tones even she can hardly interpret if her ear were not peeled for them so acutely.

“And you think I do?” Emily draws cautiously closer to him only to jump when a sudden shredding sound of tearing fabric comes from his hands. Daud holds out a strip of cloth at her.

“Cover the mark,” he instructs. She’d had the wherewithal to keep her hands behind her back thus far, but surely couldn’t maintain the act for much longer. “Don’t need any more trouble than we already have.”
“Quite.” She starts winding the length of dishcloth around her hand in the way she’s seen her father do far too many times. Like it’s ever fooled anyone as to what lurks underneath. “Perhaps Corvo could simply publish news of my whereabouts in the Dunwall papers.”

“Thomas can be trusted, if he’s the same man I once knew,” Daud seems to be trying to soothe her of all things.

“Who’s to say he is?” she adds with a pointed look “You certainly aren’t.” Ten long years of isolation aside, Emily’s not even convinced Daud is the same man as when she arrived. He gives her a tortured look, perhaps in acknowledgement of the fact.

_Not even sure I’m the same_, she guiltily considers how myopic her vision had been when she first arrived, hoping to be sent straight home. Now the farthest thing from her mind.

“Emily,” he recites her name like a line in an epic poem, something scarily profound in his voice. Daud turns from the counter with a hand half-raised like he’s trying to reach for her. Yet before he can say anything else footsteps on the stairs drive him back into his shell, fingers curling back and a caged look flitting across his face. He turns back to the counter as Thomas stomps in hardly twenty steps behind her.

“That didn’t take long.” She tries not to sound annoyed.

“Was it supposed to?” Thomas replies, so she clearly failed. Emily has to consciously suppress a look of guilt that threatens to give her away even more. Thomas thankfully doesn’t seem to suspect too much, as the next thing he says is a plain, “What’s there to eat around here?”

’Look around you,’ she almost snaps, but holds her tongue lest she seem any more petulant than she’s already established.

“I can fix us something,” Daud says like he’s ever been inclined to offer his services as a chef before now. Emily has to prompt herself to close her gaping mouth. Something she appears to be in alignment with Thomas about.

“You _cook_ now?” Thomas practically accuses, and from where she stands Emily has a clear view of the strained grimace on Daud’s face.

“Never cooked for you, didn’t mean I couldn’t,” he replies so warily Emily wonders about the context of such remarks – yet more that she doesn’t know about Daud. “There’s something you can do for me in the meantime.”

“Yes Daud?” It seems to fall out of the man on instinct, who appears to resent himself for the address. Going by the scowl that crosses his features. As does Emily’s.

“Help the Empress keep her arm in.” A flit of Daud’s eyes onto Emily’s give her cause to break into a fragile grin. “She’s been sparring with an old man for these past weeks, so I’m sure would appreciate a new challenge.” There’s amusement in his eyes when she gives him a _‘you’ve got to be kidding me’_ stare, but relishes the opportunity all the same.

“I don’t think that’s-” Thomas starts awkwardly.

“A capital idea,” she overrides. “I’ll fetch the weapons.” She recalls they’re abandoned among the trees where she and Daud were rolling about in the dirt not long ago, which is a story best not explained.
“Is that entirely… I wouldn’t want any harm to come to your majesty.” That Daud laughs at this delights her as much as it surprises Thomas.

“You’re exactly what she’s been learning to deal with.” Daud unhooks a pan from the wall before checking on the coals in the stove, then straightens up and gives Thomas a look of such surety that Emily practically glows. “So you can certainly try, but I’d not set your expectations too high.”

“What about that?” Thomas nods at Emily’s newly wrapped appendage in a way that makes her gut twist, only to be relaxed when he adds, “If you’re injured…”

“Ah, that…” she stalls. “Just a graze… the old man’s a little out of practice.” If he’s to call her Empress all the time in that tone of his, then she’ll return such mocking form of address. Though she catches a decidedly ‘you’ll pay for that later’ look on his face. She dearly hopes so.

“Meet me on the terrace when you’re ready to begin,” Emily orders in her most regal tone, and certainly doesn’t miss Daud smirking into his handiwork.

Emily fetches the swords. They’re rather father from the house than she expects. She resists a tempting notion to slip into imagining where she and Daud would have been if Thomas hadn’t shown up – in bed with her legs over her head most likely – as she returns to the terrace. The fleeting thought alone makes it hard to keep a straight face as she returns to Thomas, who stands from the viewing platform of the patio looking over the grounds like he can’t believe either he or the house is really here.

Is that what I used to look like? She wonders as she comes close to his wide-eyed, sweaty expression.

“Here.” She throws him Daud’s ever-reliable sabre, though she doubts Thomas is unarmed – discretion is admittedly an advantage of the folding blades their kind seem so fond of. He catches it, and Emily spins her own as if she really needs to warm up after the fight that his arrival cut short. Or cut short what was happening after the fight was cut short, at least.

“Are you sure this is necessary?” he asks uncertainly.

“Absolutely not,” she sounds – to her own ears at least – quite amiable all things considered, “but I can assure you there’s little else to do until lunchtime.” At least fully clothed. “Shall we begin?”

Still looking entirely unconvinced he’s about to spar with the Empress, Thomas raises his sword into a truly pitiful sweep that she parries and has the point of her own pressed firmly against his chest before he can blink. Something else she can’t do anymore, after all that work trying to get to grips with the damned power.

“As much as I appreciate the concern, I can assure you that humouring me is entirely unnecessary,” she remarks aloofly, then steps back and returns to stance. “Now are we going to get started or not?”

Thomas stares for a moment, then comes at her with a flawless execution of a drill it feels like Daud has put her through hundreds of times. She dreads to think how many times Thomas must have been required to perform such routine. Though he has plenty of strength, and knows the moves so well he could probably do them asleep, Emily is familiar enough with what he’s trying to do that she has no trouble turning the motion away at the last minute, sending him stumbling to the side as he regains his footing.
Starting to take her seriously after that, Thomas finally begins to launch attacks at her that are worth her time of day. He’s less refined than Daud even at his loosest, making up with sheer energy for the minimalistic discipline that defines almost every move his one-time employer makes.

Their shared teacher isn’t anywhere to be seen at first, but soon comes up from the direction of the garden with a few vegetables settled in the crook of his arm. Thomas glances away to take in the curious – at least to him – picture, giving Emily a perfect opportunity to disarm him before whisking her rapier in a swish arc. She catches the whaler with a rap to the knee that buckles it, dropping to kneel just in time to send a satisfied look over his head at Daud.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” Daud comments hoarsely while Thomas snatches his blade off the patio, getting up with a sour expression. “Have you forgotten who’s trained her?” Emily is gloating, admittedly, until his eyes roll up and he continues, “and you,” with an overtly scolding tone, “showing off to an audience is for exhibitions.” Her grin tightens to a pout that Daud seems utterly unaffected by, shuffling past the pair of them on his utterly un-assassin-like sandals and into the kitchen.

“Has he always been like that?” She frowns after him, privately considering the ways he could make amends to her for such ill treatment.

“No,” Thomas answers a little breathily, perhaps suffering with the heat, only to follow up with, “He’s never that nice.”

“Nice?” Emily echoes in horror.

“He’d barely an ill word to say to either of us,” he replies. “If he’s not telling you exactly what you’re doing wrong then it means only one thing.”

“That perfection has been achieved?” she suggests wryly, at which Thomas gives her an entirely peculiar look.

“That’s he’s going easy on someone,” he supplies instead, a cast to his face like he wonders exactly how easy Daud’s been on her. “He must have gone soft,” he mutters a little lower, which bothers her far more than she’d like to admit.

“Is that so surprising?” she says curtly. “It’s been some ten years since he was the assassin you once knew.” Who murdered her mother in cold blood, no less. Because for how well Thomas must have known that Daud, this one is hers to claim such intimate knowledge of, Emily thinks just a touch possessively.

Her comment definitely seems to sting, a displeased tint creeping into Thomas’s expression that would never dare make itself known in direct criticism of an Empress. She’ll let him work it out in swordplay instead, Emily decides, lunging suddenly into a strike to test his reflexes – not bad, clearly well trained by Daud to react on the fly – and finding his response much more challenging now that she’s annoyed him.

He puts up a more interesting fight this time, but it’s more exercise than a true challenge such as Daud presents. However, the exertion still takes its toll, particularly on Thomas, who Emily starts to fear for heatstroke given the colour of his complexion and way sweat pours off him when they pause.

“Perhaps that’s enough,” she grants when he becomes too clumsy to present anything except idle occupation. It is the hottest part of the afternoon, and she’s not exactly enduring it with the grace
and poise of an Empress either. It feels like she’s done nothing but fight – or the carnal flipside – all day. “There’s a water pump at the end of the path.”

Thomas seems rather too worn out to do anything more than let his sword fall slack and nod, sweeping a curtain of sweat off his forehead and setting off in the way of relief. No sooner is he out of sight than Emily slinks into the kitchen to find Daud.

“How fares lunch?” She takes stock of the square of his shoulders as he stands in front of the counter, putting what look to be the finishing touches on a few simply-prepared plates. Things she’s eaten before, though she’s hardly to complain – his cooking still far surpasses hers.

“Almost,” he answers concisely. “How fares Thomas?”

“You trained him well.” She idles closer, even though their guest would only need to walk past the open window and see them interacting in the wrong way to have all too many questions. “But I think you trained me better.”

When Daud glances at her, Emily can count only a handful of moments where she’s wanted to be kissed more. But footsteps outside as Thomas slogs past the window towards the pump remind her how and why it cannot be.

_Later_, she promises herself, still ill-content to wait for anything she wants. She occupies herself with setting out the meal instead. Brushes of her fingers against Daud’s as she takes a dish from his hand are the most she can allow herself under the observation of his former right-hand man.

Whether tired, awkward or some combination thereof, there isn’t much in the way of discussion over the meal – she and Daud obviously can’t talk as they might alone. And without that hard-won ease of conversation, Daud seems more content to eat in uncomfortable silence than fill it with awkward small talk. Emily also can’t help feeling there’s something he wanted to say to her earlier that he’s not been able to yet.

“You bring any cigarettes?” is the only thing that graces Daud’s – or anyone’s – lips over the meal. Emily’s a little perturbed that it’s not even to her.

“Uh… some,” Thomas answers, fumbling around to hold out a pack. “Half a pack of Dunwall Stripe.”

“That’s fine,” Daud responds while still managing to sound disgruntled somehow, reaching for the pack and drawing a couple of cigarettes out – one for his mouth, another behind an ear for safekeeping.

Not long after Daud disappears inside, taking dishes with him and not remerging thereafter. Emily takes to the hammock. Though she gave as good as she got today, she’s still exhausted from all the different shades of activity. Thomas thankfully retreats indoors soon as well, unwisely braving the heat of the upstairs as Emily sways herself into a well-deserved nap.

She wakes a little later with a hand gently wrapping around her foot, opening her eyes to find Daud standing beside her.

“He’s asleep,” he says scratchily, and she stretches with a small wobble.

“So was I,” comes her riposte, but the look in Daud’s face doesn’t suggest he’s much for fun and games right now.

“I thought we might be able to talk.” He walks up alongside her, not failing to trail his palm like an
afterthought over her ankle and up her leg.

“Talk?” she echoes with her eyes fluttering as his hand regrettably lifts somewhere around her thigh. He comes to stand level with her shoulders, and she gazes up at him with drowsy affection. “I’m sure we can manage more than that.”

“Emily,” he delivers in that way again; using her name with such reverence, even doubled up as a warning.

“How do you do that?” she asks.

“What?” He gives a puzzled tilt of his head.

“What?” she asks.

“Make my name sound more proper than my title.” Whether he’s referring to her as Empress or the even more mocking – and incorrect, though it’s hardly (or entirely) the point – highness. Neither leave Daud’s lips with such sincerity as he speaks her name alone.

“Because it’s who you are,” he replies with surprising ease, “not what you are.”

Their company being assured as out of sight and consciousness, Emily stretches again but this time reaches for him until she can walk her hands up the edge of his collar and loop her hands behind his neck. A grip he obligingly ducks into with an almost drugged look.

“What did you want to talk about?” She finds he’s not looking her in the eyes.

“It can wait,” he murmurs throatily.

“For what?” Her weight still hangs from him as he answers her in action, holding firm and leaning in just enough as she bends her arm to pull herself onto his mouth.

The kiss has an edge sharpened by the denial of company. Because for the first time, neither of them are the reason it isn’t happening. “You…” she thinks Daud breathes over her lips before collapsing back in more. Tongue rolling over hers, needy heat between her legs that’s picking up from where they left off without breaking stride.

“I suddenly remember exactly where we were before your man interrupted us,” she announces when they finally draw apart. He’s smoked those cigarettes, she can tell from the taste he leaves in her mouth.

“Not mine anymore.” He’s stooped over her like he’ll put his back into any shape she requires. “He’s Corvo’s man now.”

“True,” she concedes, then tempts fate by following, “So what does that make you?”

Your man, she realises she desperately wants him to say the moment it comes out, even knowing that he’d never admit to something so indebting.

Daud looks like her as if it might be true anyway. Desperately raw as she hangs from him like a swing. Yet the question he puts to her makes the hurt she reads understandable. The thing that has stopped him up like a cork. Sooner or later, it had to come.

“When will you leave?”
This chapter goes out to every commenter (or reader who had the same thought) who asked me 'hasn't Emily been away for, like, a while? Doesn't anyone care?' I did say I had all these things taken into consideration it just took... awhile... to get around to them. Checking my timeline (I have a M$ paint timeline complete with chillies for Spicy Chapters) this is (still) day 24 here for Emily.

I heard you people like sexual tension and awkwardness and suffering, so having *just* gotten Emily and Daud past the point of generating it themselves, I thought I'd drag them backwards a little. You know. For the suffering. The delicious, delicious suffering.

Hugs and kisses to all my lovely regulars who keep coming back each week, writing this fic has been great but the persistence to keep going with it definitely comes from knowing you lot are going 'hey it's Friday so what torture have you got in store for us this week?'

On which note... cya next week!
The Fiftieth Lesson

Chapter Summary

If Emily won't talk about it then Daud will have to: he asks when she's going to leave.

Chapter Notes

Last update I'll be making from Southeast Asia! It's been a trip, though this fanfic has been updating since before I left and has been pretty important to me throughout. It's been a very much needed and appreciated escape from reality, and no doubt will continue to be so as I go back home and start looking for a job.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Daud.” Emily bends her arms with the intention to pull herself onto his mouth again, but he evades the gesture.

“I just want to know when,” he says after a truly pained pause. “I won’t… ask that you stay longer,” he stalls so briefly only spending the time she has in study of him allows her to pick it up, “than necessary.”

It had been his suggestion that Thomas stay the night, only because he happened to think of it before Emily did. Though she hadn’t considered it properly, she struggles to swallow the obvious point. He doesn’t want her to leave – not yet.

“Is it necessary?” Rather than deny it when they both know well enough, he just shakes his head. She’s even gotten as much as she’ll make of her promise to beat him before she leaves, so by all accounts there’s nothing to stop her going. Except the inclination. “I didn’t think so.”

It’s an unusual pose they’ve struck, so Emily concedes to actually getting out of the hammock rather than dangling off him like an ape. Gestures with a tilt of her head for the table where they amble to sit.

“Corvo sent Thomas to bring you back to Dunwall, I suppose,” Daud guesses with a carefully even keel, throwback to his days of pretend indifference.

“Read for yourself,” she offers freely, pulling the folded paper out and tossing at him across the table. He doesn’t react so obviously, but Daud still reaches for the missive and scans the lines with quick eyes.

“The cat?” he queries with a tilt of amused eyes to hers.

“Gift from the populace in the early years of my reign,” she explains. “A couple of children from the slums, in fact.” Daud is watching her for more of the story, and this is hardly what they’re meant to be talking about, but she gives a sigh and indulges him. “They were at the front of the barrier during one of my earliest public appearances, waving around this tiny little thing,” she
recollects. “They wanted to give it to me as thanks for curing the plague… their parents had survived because of it, I think.”

“They gave you a cat?”

“I assume it was all they had to offer,” she says thoughtfully, and finds something terrible in Daud’s eyes as he looks at her. Like admiration. “My advisors wanted it drowned, of course, but Corvo…” This one stings to recall. “He announced he’d been thinking of getting a mouser for the tower and wouldn’t hear another word on it.”

“I can’t believe he has trouble with the company of mice.”

“They weren’t to know that,” Emily says cannily. “And Corvo received no gratitude from Princess anyway.”

“Princess,” Daud repeats back at her. “The cat’s name?” She nods, and he gives a smile that’s despairing and fond at the same time. His eyes tilt back down to the paper. “Corvo requests your return.”

“So you did read the rest of the letter,” she teases mildly, but the joking mood has passed. “Corvo sent me here in the first place,” she says. “I was supposed to return by myself, but we never talked about how long I would be away. He’s getting restless.”

“It’s been a while,” Daud replies surely. “Almost a month.”

_A month_, she boggles at, wondering how it can feel so short and long at the same time.

“How much longer do you want me to stay?” she puts to him, for lack of any idea herself. She doesn’t want to leave, that’s all she’s worked out thus far.

“Don’t ask me that.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not my decision to make,” he snaps a little. “So don’t ask me like it matters what I want.”

“Daud.” She reaches instinctively to curl her fingers around the hand he rests on the table. “It does.”

“Don’t,” he orders, pleads and warns all at the same time. But leaves his hand under hers. Even while putting the other to his brow. Then probably because she’s not giving him enough on her own, he starts pushing for answers, “Tomorrow?” Something inside Emily curls up like it’s dying of cold.

“No.” It falls from her instinctively. “Too soon.” She’s not ready to go yet – or to say goodbye, as much as it’s the last thing she’d have ever expected.

“Thomas expects to bring you post-haste.” They would’ve left today if she’d allow it, Emily knows. If the whaler had arrived within the first week of her stay here then she might have taken him up on the offer. And missed all this. She’s glad it took Corvo so long to send someone for her.

“He’s acting for Corvo, who worries only for the politicians and advisors you recommend I relieve of their duties,” she tries to dismiss humorously. Such thoughts don’t help her preference to feel more comfortable in this remote corner of her Empire than the other parts she’s known. “They can
“Then what are you going to tell him?” Daud jerks his head at the house.

“That… my training isn’t finished yet.”

“For how long?” She understands why he wants to know, but hopes he understands why she doesn’t want to decide.

“I don’t know,” she blurts. “A… few days, I suppose.” How did it go by so fast, she thinks, wishing she could go back to day one knowing what she does now – what better use she’d make of the time. “Enough to conclude my training and prepare for the trip back.”

“Your training is already finished,” he reminds her.

“I didn’t mean as an assassin.” Daud recognises the filthy look she gives him with a weary sigh. His hand closes around her fingers, which she squeezes like it’s all he can grant herself right now. If they do any more than that, who knows what state they’d be in when Thomas reappears. After threatening the Outsider himself not to tell Corvo about them, she’s no love for repeating the process.

“You know you have sleep in your room again,” Daud says while the conversation is derailing in that direction.

“But-”

“It’s too risky.” He’s not wrong. So she bites her tongue, as much as it pains her to do.

“You’re probably right,” she relents, but seems surprised that she’s actually agreeing so readily. Though it makes more sense when she asks, “How long do you think we have until he wakes up?”

“Not long enough for that.” Daud’s response makes her think he’s not unaffected by the suggestion, shifting his thumb to sit over her knuckles and drawing slowly across them.

“Only because you insist on going slow all the time.” One of his eyebrows lifts.

“Hardly caught you complaining.” This discussion isn’t really helping either of them, not to mention being a notable side-track from where they started.

“All I’m saying is in the time we’ve been talking about it, we could already be in bed.” Emily is absolutely sure she can see him considering it, which is victory enough, even if he doesn’t move from his seat.

“A few days would be…” She never expected to feel like her heart and stomach are swapping places over this, but no one appears to have told them that, “appreciated.”

Emily gives a weak smile and holds his hand tighter in hers, noting without comment that he didn’t say ‘enough’.

Thomas seems intent on never letting them get a decent amount of time alone, or is perhaps just unable to sleep long in the intense heat of the upstairs. Either way, he reappears so soon that Daud has to snatch his hand out from underneath Emily’s, sharper instincts and greater commitment to not being caught than she has. Most of her discipline is consumed by resisting the temptation to be
holding much more than his hand, regardless of where they are and who might stroll onto the terrace looking rather disgruntled and poorly-orientated.

“We’ve been talking,” she says to Thomas in a way that might or might not be compensating for the lightning-fast whip of Daud’s hand away from hers, getting straight to the matter while it’s still fresh in her mind.

“We?” Thomas echoes far too obviously.

“I’ve been talking with… Daud,” she finds herself amending, hoping he thinks the heat is the main cause for the colour of her face. “My training isn’t yet finished, so I shalln’t be able to leave for Dunwall just yet.”

“Oh,” Thomas replies in a way that could be groggy rather than outright suspicious. “Is that so?”

“After getting this far, there’s little sense leaving the programme unfinished,” she remarks carelessly, only for something to shift in Thomas’s face, eyes flitting to Daud almost accusingly.

“You’ve been teaching her the programme?” Emily would joke about the oddity of so vague a name for such well-renowned training, but the mood doesn’t suit it. Daud hasn’t wavered from his infamous mask of indifference, donned the moment Thomas stepped out here.

“The Empress is here to learn how to defend herself from assassins,” he points out neutrally. “Knowing what they know is part of that.”

“I suppose so,” Thomas begrudges without really disguising his displeasure – a betrayal, perhaps, that a once-confidential set of techniques should be taught outside of their brethren.

“It’s been most useful,” Emily finds herself chiming in before her reasoning can decide if it’s a good idea or not. “Unless you’d rather I was ill-prepared for an attack such as the one that ended my mother’s life?” She couldn’t cut any closer without sawing through bone, and can see the muted shock in the fixing of Daud’s eyes on hers as she dares to speak so boldly.

“Of course not,” Thomas murmurs, quite effectively – if not a little brutally – cowed. “Let me know if I can be of any assistance.”

“Well since you’re offering,” Daud says assertively, getting to his feet and perhaps deliberately ignoring the insincere undertone of Thomas’s suggestion. “You can go through the drills together.” Emily makes an annoyed sound, only to find it unexpectedly echoed by Thomas.

“Really?” he groans.

“You asked,” Daud retorts belligerently. “That’s if you still remember them.” One of his dismissive tricks, Emily recognises without a shadow of a doubt. She can imagine with even more clarity what kind of a master he’d have made back in the day.

“How could I forget?” Thomas replies grimly. “Come on, then,” he actually sighs. “Let’s get this over with.”

Daud watches them at first, tongue clicking when mistakes are made without ever needing to say what either of them have done wrong, holding up the process until a passing ‘hm’ allows them to proceed, but eventually starts to wander about the terrace, collecting tools and baskets to suggest he’s going out to work the land.

“I’m glad I’m not the only one who resents these wretched drills,” Emily comments under her
breath when he’s finally out of earshot.

“Bane of our lives,” Thomas grumbles, and she sniggers a little, pausing now they’re out of the watchful and ever-demanding eye of their trainer.

“Was he as demanding an… employer as he is a teacher?” she finds herself querying with more camaraderie than expected – wondrous what half an hour of drills in the sweltering heat will do for a sense of shared burden.

“Worse,” he grunts.

“Then why did you work for him?” The question throws Thomas off. Probably not one he’s had to answer much, and his reluctance to do so is very clear.

“I had a… situation,” He seems cagy, perhaps feeling like he’s breaking code, or merely unwilling to answer.

“You’re under no obligation to tell me,” she says with a hint of disinterest that’s entirely misleading. “I’m merely curious as to why someone would work such an unsavoury trade for so demanding an employer.” It’s deliberately provocative, and Emily can see that it works, frustration building under the surface of Thomas’s clammy countenance. “I mean, there had to be some reason.”

“I was in debt, all right?” he bites. “I owed him the price of my life.”

“What?” she puzzles as he heaves a heavy breath, wiping his face on a sleeve. “How?”

“The people I worked for before Daud were far more unsavoury,” he explains. She finds that hard to imagine at first, but soon thinks of a handful of gangs and criminal organisations that could rival the Whalers on death and easily beat them for destruction. “I wanted out, but there were only two ways to get away from the position I was in,” he continues, “coin or a coffin.” A gang was seeming ever more likely, she deduces.

“How much coin?”

“Five thousand, plus another grand for every year I’d been with them,” Thomas answers coldly, looking to shock her more than anything, she thinks. “At least twelve in all, maybe more.” It’s a sizable sum even to her, making it almost unfathomable for someone of lesser standing. “I couldn’t pay, so I ran.” He pauses, gazing down the grounds like he’s looking for Daud. “I was good at running, so they eventually sent him after me to make sure I reached the coffin.”

When, she almost asks, wondering if the job would turn up in Daud’s records, but if the contract was never filled it may not have graced the pages of his accounts.

“But instead of killing you he recruited you,” she surmises. “Why?”

“He said anyone who made as much trouble for him to track down as I did was worth more than the cost of my buyout,” he replies.

“What about the… your former employers,” she amends right before saying ‘gangleaders’ as if they don’t know that anyway. Things best left unsaid, perhaps.

“You’ll have to ask him,” he replies. “All I know is he paid them in full, cash, the same day he finally found me.” Finally succumbing to the heat, he starts to undo the button-down overshirt he wears, pushing back thick hair from his face. “I worked for him after that.”
“To pay back the debt?”

“At first,” he reveals. “He docked it from my earnings little by little so I hardly noticed it going, then by the time it was paid off the extra cash felt almost like a… promotion.” It all sound so strange if she stops to think about it – wages and employers – but what else to call it? Make the abnormal normal, treat it like something everyday and it could feel so, even for such a gruesome business as theirs.

“You didn’t think about leaving?” she poses.

“At the start,” he admits uncomfortably, fingering a mark on the back of his hand. “But it wasn’t long before I was earning more money than I’d ever made, and for better work too.” The notion is chilling to her core. But Emily can only imagine what someone would need to come from to find what they did for Daud that much better, so doesn’t press it further than it needs to be. “Not to mention-” he cuts off then, just when she’s a feeling things are about to get good.

“What?” she pries without necessarily expecting to get anywhere.

“Don’t get me wrong, he’s not easy to work for,” Thomas says with such little prompting; easy to get information out of compared to his former employer. “I didn’t get a day off for the first three years, but Daud, he… makes it worthwhile.”

“How?” she dares ask.

“Pushing you past your limits, by the Void does he do that,” Thomas bemoans, and if she doesn’t know the half of it sometimes. “But he also gave a damn. More than most of us had been given by anyone before.”

“I see.” Emily fights a peculiar sensation in her gut. “What if someone wanted to leave?” Thomas gives her an odd look, like he can’t really understand why anyone would, but entertains her nonetheless.

“Those that did were free to do so,” he answers with a shrug. “As long as their debts were paid he never compelled anyone to stay.” She realises she might be verging on hypocritical asking these questions, given her own reluctance to leave Daud’s company just yet.

“He inspires loyalty,” she says without it really being a question, gazing in the direction Daud last went in, wondering where he is – missing the ability to simply go find him without needing to account for herself.

“Demands it, more like,” Thomas seems to subtly correct. “Until you trusted him you didn’t go out to work, so you didn’t get paid.”

“Oh really?” She leans back against one of the pillars of the trellis, the routine of drills abandoned. There’s a stage of the programme she’s yet to hear of from his own lips, though she might reason other things from them would stand in lieu of such a trial. “What else did he demand?”

“You name it.” Thomas isn’t as disgruntled by her now, Emily thinks, loosening up more and more by the minute; theirs is an easy subject matter to discuss, at least while he’s not nearby. “These damn drills for one, curfews… insisting everyone could read and write.”

“Oh?” She’s as surprised by the notion that literacy wouldn’t be a given among their creed than Daud insisting upon it. Did he teach them that too, should it be necessary? “To what end?”

“Claimed he’d no need for illiterate assassins,” Thomas regales. “If you couldn’t read the name of
your mark, you didn’t get the contract. Couldn’t write a report of your patrol, then you didn’t go on
one.” They sound like direct quotes, and though it must have been the same decade since Thomas
had last seen him, it doesn’t seem like the memories have faded much.

“Have you missed him?” she blurts out of nowhere.

“What kind of a question is that?” he retorts bitterly, which seems like enough of a yes to go on.

“If you two are content to chat so idly,” come the rasping tones of the object of their discussion,
and Daud blinks into view on the edge of the terrace in a way that’s clearly not necessary beyond
the purposes of making them feel caught out. A face like he knows exactly what – who – they’ve
been gossiping about, “then I could use some help in the kitchen.”

“I’ll-” Emily and Thomas chorus at almost the same time, firing awkward looks at each other so
hot on the trail of discussing loyalty.

“Please, Empress,” Thomas continues first. “You needn’t trouble yourself.”

“It’s no trouble,” she returns just as forcefully, striding past him towards Daud with a roll of her
eyes that she’s fairly sure only he can see, “and please, we’re not in Dunwall anymore, you can...
call me Emily.”

Then at least Daud might too.

Having brokered a slightly more tangible, if still uneasy, peace with Thomas, the air is a little less
tense even as they appear to compete to assist Daud in the kitchen while he prepares several of the
dishes that had graced the table during the trader’s visit. It’s still an odd fit, and Emily feels rather
affronted to be in contest for his attention again.

Aware that she’s been somewhat spoiled for it until now, that doesn’t help Emily’s impulse to grab
Daud by the chin and turn his face to look at her when he speaks to her in passing. Or to stop
calling her ‘Empress’ in that damned tone of his, something he’s continuing to do specifically to
annooy her, if she didn’t know any better.

There’s also the fact that every casual touch between them feels like too much and little at the
same time. Contact so charged it’s a wonder there aren’t sparks flying between their fingers in the
casual handing over of objects or not-so-accidental brushes while walking around each other in the
shared space. Just once he sets a hand on her back to shift her when she’s in the way, and she feels
a rush from head to toe.

She’d somehow thought that it wouldn’t be so difficult being around Daud after breaking the ice
with Thomas, who seems thankfully oblivious to a tension so monumental Emily starts making
herself blush with the way her thoughts are turning. Something not at all helped when she’s
reaching over the counter for a knife and catches a sidelong glance from Daud that makes her heart
skip a beat, wondering what he’s thinking of to be looking at her like that.

There comes a point when Emily can’t stand it any longer. She needs, if nothing else, to get away
and clear her head – or at least out of sight so she can fluster in peace. The door outside is rarely
closed, and she’s no fancy for being seen with her head in her hands pacing around the terrace
despairing at just what kind of a state she’s been put into. So she opts to venture further indoors,
coming upon the storeroom-come-pantry that she’s rarely been into, not needing or knowing what
most of the preserved foodstuffs it contains are.
It’s private, though, so she slips in through the slightly stiff door and leans back against the shelves, closing her eyes to the light of dusk let in through a partially obscured window. The meagre light is supplemented with a beam through the door, cast from newly lit lanterns, and with a forehead squeezed between her fingers Emily wonders exactly how much tolerance to sleeping draught Thomas might have. Hearing sounds from the kitchen nearby, out of sight but not mind, she then has a slightly better idea.

“Daud?” she calls out without moving, then waits for what feels like an uncomfortably long time.

“Yes?” comes the reply at last.

“I… can’t find the artichokes.” She waits even longer this time, heart thumping right underneath her tongue she could swear, until his footsteps thud softly up to the door.

At first only his fingers appear around it, but with careful precision he slots himself through the half-open door. He appears to do this first and foremost to appoint her with a sceptical look.

“Artichokes?” he echoes softly, and she grins in the slant of light that sneaks in through the door.

“Got you out here, didn’t it?”

“Which you did because?” he prompts expectantly, only for her to stretch out an arm in invitation. “No,” he replies quietly, and then surely out of spite, “Empress.”

“If you actually mean that, then you ought to do as I wish,” she shoots right back at him, then springs off the shelf she leans against to transfer her weight to press against his chest. That he lets her is incriminating enough, so she only needs to turn her face up to his for their mouths to be hovering agonising centimetres apart. “I… wanted to be alone, all right?” But alone means with him, it goes without saying.

She kisses him in a way that’s barely a start on being enough. He mixes elements of reciprocating while somehow still backing away, hollowing out to move away from her even as he grants access to the soft inside of his mouth. They pull apart with a wet sound that they’d better hope no one is listening for.

“This is a bad idea,” he notes, but Emily just raises a hand to push the door shut the rest of the way. Closing out the larger part of the light, she relies on Daud’s barely-cast outline as she moves back in for him.

“Then we’d best not get caught.”

Chapter End Notes

Special Guest My Made Up Thomas Backstory and lots of Whaler details that I’m pretty fond of.

I mentioned Emily’s cat in last week’s comments, and ended up adding the cat exchange to this chapter like… yesterday. I had the conversation in snatches in my head but never found a place to put it in until recently. Princess is an absolute terror that
stalks the halls of Dunwall and so help you should you cross her. She's only gotten older and grumpier with age.

Also ft. an obscure artichoke throwback. What fun.
If she didn’t know better, Emily would think the Knife of Dunwall was professionally dedicated to the pretence of not wanting things that he does. His enduring devotion to the cause of resisting her is nothing short of incredible.

“Emily,” he murmurs between what are verging on messy kisses, which is a great deal better than ‘Empress’ but still low down in her rankings of best purposes for his mouth to be put to. “This has to stop.” That he delivers this right as his hand curls around her neck and mouth pulls back onto hers assures her she wasn’t the only one feeling the pressure out there.

“Then stop,” she replies close over him, enough that she can move to hold his lower lip between hers. She draws agonisingly away, testing when he’ll duck in to lay his mouth firmly over hers again, which is a hot moment later. Daud only backs away away with a shudder when her tongue follows the edge of his.

“Enough,” he rasps in a way that sounds like he’s missing a ‘not’ on the beginning, but now the hand that was dragging her into him slides down to the less stimulating level of her shoulder. He actually pushes her away, though only gently, and not far enough that she can’t still feel the quickness of his breath against her skin. “Don’t make this harder than it already is.”

“Interesting choice of words,” she slurs persuasively, trailing her fingertips down the front of his shirt with every intention of continuing – until he takes her wrist in his hand and moves it away.

“No, Emily.” It’s like hitting a brick wall.

“Then why did you come in here?” she snaps more than she means to.

“Because,” he says in a torturously low tone, “I’m a foolish old man.”

“Don’t say that.” She tries to reach for him again, a knee-jerk reaction, only to have her hand
steered wide.

“Thomas is going to wonder what’s taking us so long,” he points out.

“Let him,” she spits, and finally snatches her hand out of his grip in frustration.

“You know as well as I it's unwise,” he advises in the same hoarse almost-whisper, and she finds herself actually angry that it’s come to this. After all the agony and misunderstanding, the time it took for her to realise that what she really wants from him. Which isn’t anything more complicated than his want for her, and his price for such impassioned devotion is that it can’t mean nothing – but how could it?

To have finally cut through layers upon layers of Daud’s defences. To make it work, only to end up sneaking around lest her father’s envoy blow the whole thing open – even after making a deal with the Outsider himself to ensure what should rightfully be kept between them stays that way – frustrates Emily the more she thinks about it.

“Then what are we supposed to do?” she hisses, looking up even if she can’t make out the features of his face in the poor light. “Pretend as if nothing’s happened?” Until Thomas leaves, presumably taking her with him.

“Yes,” Daud answers as if it could be satisfactory. As if he wants that – or that what he wants isn’t worth consideration. He draws away from her, and spills a slim beam of light as he pries open the door, ominous words uttered out to it echoing back at her as he quietly murmurs, “This was a mistake.”

He doesn’t mean that, Emily thinks instinctively, despite a knot in her gut that only seems to be twisting itself tighter together. Instead she dares to ask, “What was?” to the outline of his back. “Coming in here, or all of it?”

“… Both,” he answers grimly before leaving. She only follows when she thinks she can do so without flinging something at the back of his head out of spite, but strongly considers it anyway.

“What about the artichokes?” Thomas enquires blithely as she returns to the kitchen empty-handed, and she resists the urge to look at Daud, not least for the scowl she knows it’ll put on her face and fearing the one she’ll find on his.

“We’re all out,” comes his unforgiving answer.

Just when things might have gotten amicable they’re derailed once again, so Emily removes herself from the dinner preparations and loiters outside, deigning only to light the lamps hanging from the trellis as she sits in sullen silence and contemplates how Daud could dare to call anything that’s passed between them a mistake.

“Still can’t believe you cook,” Thomas is heard to comment as he follows Daud out of the kitchen when the evening meal is finally ready, providing all the additional hands that could be needed; no further use for her own two, it’d seem.

“Who used to before?” she asks frostily as she gets out of the hammock.

“Whoever was on duty,” Daud interjects before Thomas can answer, in spite of her clearly not asking him. She fires a curt look his way as he lays out their evening meal. If he’s not comfortable
with her questioning his former right-hand man for details he’s avoided sharing with her – things not recorded in his carefully constructed accounts – then that’s a terrible shame for him.

“Or in trouble,” Thomas suffixes on the back humorously, and she sees the flinch of annoyance in the corners of Daud’s eyes as he sits a full arm’s length away from either of them. Fine, she thinks spitefully, if he’s going to be like this then he can sulk to his heart’s content.

“In trouble?” she echoes with a little more vigor, giving Thomas an intrigued look across the table. “How did one get into that among a brotherhood of assassins?”

“Breaking house rules, in-fighting, bringing civvies into the district,” he remarks good-naturedly. “Unless you were Lurk, of course.” There’s a pause, and Emily watches Daud freeze, scowling into the table. “Then you could do no wrong.”

“Lurk?” Emily repeats, wincing as she tries to work out why she can hear the word in Daud’s voice in her memory. “What’s that?”

“Who,” Thomas corrects, and he’s not really looking at her anymore. Daud is determined to look at neither of them. “His second, the real one, before me.”

“She had it tougher than all of you put together,” Daud growls without looking up. “So don’t give me that.”

“She’s been looking for you.”

“I’m sure she’s not the only one.” Except this she didn’t have Corvo’s intelligence network and a vaguely helpful map, clearly. “She left,” Daud delivers after what seems like some displeased consideration.

“You didn’t give her a choice.”

“Then she shouldn’t have betrayed me.” It’s hurt that could still be a day fresh, the way it tears out of Daud like ripping up parchment.

“Betrayed?” Emily reflects.

“Stay out of this, Empress,” he cracks his temper on her so smartly that if not for their company, she’d probably have lunged for him across the table out of spite. “It doesn’t concern you.” She quiets, but mostly out of a divisive struggle between shock and fury.

“That witch could’ve gone after any one of us,” Thomas starts making a case as if he came here just for this; Corvo and herself merely an excuse. “We’d all have fallen to her guile the same, or worse.”

“Doesn’t excuse it,” Daud growls.

“What witch is this?” Emily finds herself interceding again anyway. “Not the one you-”

“I told you this doesn’t concern you.” There’s no mistaking the anger Daud wears fresh across his face as he hisses at her.

“My mistake,” Emily returns icily. “Although if it’s the same witch you prevented from usurping my throne, then I’d consider that it does concern me.” Thomas looks surprised, perhaps that she knows, rather than the deed itself.
“What you consider doesn’t matter.” Daud catches himself like a snag in fabric on Emily's fearsome glare, and pulls back a little. “This is what I wanted to get away from,” he mutters into his food, drawing back like a great wave receding along a beach. “Why I came here.”

“Then what do you call this?” Thomas accuses with an almost rude gesture at Emily. She might have been sympathetic over Daud being railed at concomitantly, if he wasn’t being so unpleasant in the first place. “After all these years, teaching our programme to the Empress at the Lord Protector’s request, but you won’t make contact with Billie?”

“I never wanted to do this,” Daud bites like a mouthful of lemon rind. “You know why I couldn’t refuse.”

“Charming,” Emily quips sarcastically, but it’s the spark that lights the whole keg.

“That’s enough, Emily!” he barks, and it seems to shock Thomas as much as her – finally calling her by her name rather than title, but in a way she wishes he hadn’t. Daud stands, no less angry, though slightly less raw in how it flows out of him. “If you intend to discuss me at such length, then do so without my involvement.” He steps away from the table. “The pair of you can leave and take it all with you.”

“Daud-” falls simultaneously from each their mouths, a chorus of frustration and entreaty.

“Don’t,” he snaps, and it surely can’t be missed that his eyes are on her. “If this is what you wish to dwell on then just go already.” The words pull tight a knot in her stomach, locking Emily up with the sudden, moments-too-late realisation that it’s gone too far.

“Daud,” she repeats much softer, and if it wasn’t for Thomas would be on her feet grabbing him before he can take another step. Then again, if Thomas wasn’t here this wouldn’t have even happened. Daud ignores her appeal as he takes his half-eaten meal and storms off.

“Strange,” Thomas comments as he disappears inside.

“He’s…” upset she almost says, but sensing something else changes track at the last moment, “not normally like that?”

“I could count the times I saw him lose his temper on one hand,” Thomas relays in some kind of shocked state, staring after the doorway Daud went through like he’s going to come back out any moment.

“He doesn’t like talking about it,” she says, regretting her choices more with each passing moment. Even if he had provoked her first.

“About what?”

“The past,” she answers, only realising as she says it that’s all Thomas knows of him; that he’s a part of it, even.

“What else is there?” There’s a bitterness in his voice that hints at confusion as well as frustration; that the only time he shares with Daud is apparently the last thing he wants to remember. “Does he bore you with chat about farming instead?”

“Sometimes,” Emily replies with a fond hint, and knows Thomas’s looks are bemused verging on suspicious, but can’t quite motivate herself to care. “What did he tell you about why he left?” Her voice sounds out in the emptiness, and the character of Thomas’s expression gets even stranger.
“He didn’t,” he answers curtly. “Just disappeared. We all thought Corvo finished him off, but it was Lurk who said unless we found a body then he was still out there. I never quite believed it myself, so she’ll be collecting on some old bets when she finds out she was right.”

“You can’t,” Emily says urgently.

“What?”

“Tell anyone, not about him. Surely Corvo made that clear?”

“Lurk’s different.”

“No one is different,” she replies. “If he really wants this… Lurk to know, he’ll take it on himself. It’s not your or anyone’s position to choose for him.” She fixes Thomas under a stare that had crumpled the Outsider, so she doesn’t expect any mere mortal to have much trouble taking her seriously. It’s peculiar to feel like she’s protecting Daud of all people, but somehow, she is. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes… your majesty.” After long and visible consideration, in which Emily actually manages to eat a little something – a perfectly decent meal gone to waste, she despairs in some part of her mind. “May I ask you something?”

“Please,” she invites disingenuously.

“What are you doing here? I mean,” he breaks off before she can give an obvious answer – not a fool, if a little behind at times. “After what Daud’s done… you don’t seem to bear much ill will.”

“What purpose would ill tempers serve?” she sighs as she faces this same old question yet again. “Daud was an expensive tool moved for foul purposes, and while displaying poor judgement in letting himself be put to such a task, his actions since then are not without meaning.”

“So what, you’ve forgiven him?” Thomas says a little incredulously.

“Forgiveness doesn’t enter into it.” She’s fed up of the dichotomy of having to believe she’s either incandescently angry with him – about that, at least – or has forgiven him totally. “I suspect Daud understands the wrong he did better than anyone, and against his… better inclinations… agreed to take me on and teach me how to survive where my mother fell.”

Emily recalls what Daud had said to her when she first asked him why he was doing this, the reasoning he laid out, still as true now. “He can’t change what he’s done,” she elaborates, “but he can do something to ensure it doesn’t happen again.” She’s never had to put it into words herself, and they sound strange coming from her own mouth. “That… counts for something, at least to me.”

There’s plenty more that counts but she can’t dare breathe a word of – such as the way his admiration, to put it lightly, makes her feel powerful in a way she’d come to question in the coddled lap of an insecure and insincere Dunwall society. His demand for integrity and impatience with ‘flash’ – as he’d call it. Resisting things Emily is used to impressing others, but finding another set of traits appealing by his carefully calibrated personal moral compass. How he’s resisted every step of the way, but nothing he’s shown as she cracked him open has been anything except his true self – a flawed, rarely-happy man who against all rationality wants her enough that he’d push her away before she can leave him.

“Damn it all,” Emily breathes as the pieces fall into place.
“What?”

“Oh… nothing,” she mumbles. “Merely reflecting that Daud’s not the only one to have made mistakes.”

“That’s an understanding viewpoint of yours,” he remarks uneasily. She doubts Thomas would have ever imagined his Empress like this. Neither could she, short days ago.

“I wasn’t always so enlightened,” she says, feeling uncannily like she’s defending herself yet again. “In fact I may have… ah, stabbed him, in the early days.”

“You what?”

“By accident,” she somehow forgets to add until that point.

“You stabbed him?”

“Lightly,” she specifies.

“How?!” She’d take it as an insult to her skills, did she not know how impenetrable Daud’s defence usually is.

“Well I… caught him off-guard,” she answers with a shrug. “It was a while ago, so neither of us have made the same mistakes since.”

Of course, they’d made others. Though what did and didn’t qualify is clearly up for deliberation.

The rest of the evening passes strangely without Daud’s presence, a peculiar absence when he’s so woven into the fabric of this place. Emily tries not to make too much of a note of the hole he leaves behind. It’s absurd to think about something as silly as missing him from the other side of a closed bedroom door.

Let him sulk if he’s so inclined, she resolutely tells herself, which Thomas seems in agreement with and at no point suggests disturbing him. A habit she could guess is carried over from the Daud he’d worked for. Don’t bother the boss when he’s in a foul mood – not a lesson she’s learned, though.

Because no reasoning seems to help how much she wants to go in there. If not for Thomas – who is relatively easy company, spilling several more anecdotes that would likely infuriate Daud over a cup of wine she feels guilty for even pouring without permission – then Daud wouldn’t have even made it into his room without her hot on his heels.

Yet she doesn’t dare venture in there, knowing what might happen and fearing what might not. At least while Thomas is around and would surely make a note of her disappearing into his room and not coming back out until morning.

So she waits for Thomas to retire for the evening, making excuses as soon as he appears to tire. Emily sits on the edge of her own bed, sweating in the flickering lamplight and running over everything wrong with how things have been left. Though she changes out of her stifling clothing, she doesn’t even try going to sleep; not here, like this, with the awful heat and mess behind and underneath her. Not with such little time left.

When she’s sure that she can’t stay where she is a moment longer without going completely mad,
she gets up and heads for the window. Even if Thomas is hopefully asleep, she doesn’t think much of his hearing her door open and the stairs that she doubts she will keep quiet under her footsteps, so instead climbs out onto the roof.

There’s part of a moon out, which helps her a little in finding her way over the tiles, though she’d made it once before in the pitch black and rain, so this is comparatively easy, keeping quiet the bigger concern. She thinks she does a pretty good job, if she’s any judge of the matter.

Emily reaches the edge of the roof and rather than risk climbing, focuses on the ground – or the darkness she takes to be it – before drawing on the mark she’s finally uncovered again, focusing on where she’s intending to go and pushing herself with single-minded determination until she rushes nauseatingly through the void and staggers on the ground she lurches onto – perhaps a few inches higher than anticipated, dropping into a clumsy stumble on the gritty earth.

Turning around and feeling the wall for the window she knows is there, Emily hooks fingers between the louvres of the shutters to Daud’s room and pulls them gently open. She’s gotten approximately half-way through when she hears stirring from within.

“What are you doing?” comes a soft, somewhat sleepy murmur.

“Not getting caught,” she replies, sliding in the rest of the way.

“Emily,” he delivers in warning.

“I wanted to apologise.” That catches him, only his breath and vague outlines in the dark.

“Why?”

“Because… I’m sorry.” It sounds silly and circular, but is how she feels without any other way of explaining it. “I pushed.”

“It wasn’t you,” she hears him sigh, and instead of dawdling uselessly by his bedside finds the edge of it with her hand as she sits down, leaning into the shape and heat she can feel from his body. “Much.”

They finally make contact, no more the outside of her arm brushing lightly against his, before she moves it across him to find a place to settle her hand on the far side of him and the bed.

“Do you really want me to leave?” His hand touches against her side, a light pressure that keeps her moving in the same direction she started in, until she’s hanging right over him.

His other hand meets her cheek. Gently he guides her down until her forehead touches to his, pausing there with only the sound of their breath falling in sequence before he lets slip a single, soft, “No.”

The shape of his hand changes around her face to urge her in as she’s already on the move, falling straight into a wet, open-mouthed kiss that’s all hunger and thirst. She melts against him, dragging herself across his front with her legs tangling between his as she shifts over him, an ungainly shuffle until she’s straddled over his lap setting right everything that’d felt wrong before.

Daud makes a stifled noise when she tightens her knees around him and presses down, but he’s soon grinding back into her in the midst of needy kisses that are just as raw in their honesty as they’ve always been. His warm palms coast over the flimsy slip she’s wearing, though they only need to break apart once for him to lift his hands and pull the thin sheath of fabric unhesitatingly over her head. Undresses her like he’s never doubted what they’re doing for a moment.
“Why did you say this was a mistake?” she asks as he buries his mouth in her neck. One hand presses down over the stretch where her back runs into behind, friction between them building, and the other palm matches the shape of her chest to roam bare skin, as if examining for changes since he last touched her like this.

“Because I don’t deserve this,” he groans, vibrations against her throat. She doesn’t know how many ways he means it, but none of them can be right.

“Leave what you deserve to me.” She turns back into him for another kiss before dropping her lips to his chin, then collar, chest and stomach as she backs over her knees and takes the sheet he’s under with her.

He chokes on a deep breath when she gives him an investigative squeeze, writhing and throbbing in her grasp. He can do better, though, and seems much inclined to oblige when she takes him in her mouth. Daud makes another choked sound as she bobs her head, loud enough for her to pull her lips away from him for a sparing moment.

“As much as I’m sure you hate to hear this,” she whispers over his crotch, slow motion of her hand even as she addresses him, “you might want to try being quiet.”

“Just keep going,” he huffs distractedly, which is a request she’s not intention to refuse, circling her lips back around him and delighting in the muffled sounds as he fills out. She can hear his attempts to contain the noises she’s bringing out of him; a definite thrill that she accounts to many formative years of trying very hard not to be overheard or caught in positions that bear similarity with this one. Though truth be told she’s more often been the party needing to keep quiet.

Daud’s hand nestles under her hair before sweeping it over to one side, fingertips on the back of her neck and tentatively guiding her motion over him, getting more familiar with the act and what might be his own preferences within it. While he hadn’t been fully hard when she started, it doesn’t take all that long of doing this before she gags when she takes him all the way into her mouth."

"Em," he groans throatily, and coaxes her back when she comes off him, coasting up the way she came until she’s back to the level of his face, noses bumping as he stretches open-mouthed around her lips, seeming almost to inhale her before sinking back into a kiss with new tastes of him on her tongue. “Why’d you ever do this to me?” She shifts to rest with her temple to his.

“Didn’t we already establish that?” she pours into his ear before running her tongue around it. “It’s what you deserve.” He bucks underneath her; a hot, hard mess for her to take pleasure from. She'll let him fall apart in her hands even if she undoes herself in the process.

“Yes,” he concedes as she rushes to pull off the underclothes she’s had on far too long already, settling against him warm and wet as he adds a guttural, “Please.”

She takes him in hand and holds firm. A few carefully stifled noises of her own as she pushes down to fill herself, and before she knows it is shuddering and clenching tight from just that alone.

“Oh fuck,” Daud moans at a whisper, feeling her come off so little. Emily doubts that anyone – not even them – could have anticipated this to be so compelling a part of their pull to each other, but it’s quite clearly becoming the case. She shushes him, a finger to his lips as she carefully rolls her hips, but makes a conspicuous sound of her own when he opens his mouth around her fingertip, teeth digging into the pad of her finger just before the first joint.

Emily drives herself to stay relaxed as she starts to move, paced slowly at first as he’s always urging her to be. Daud holds rigid under her, a slight push upwards the only addition he makes,
hands to her hips and following as she rides him. She holds all the control from this position and wields it comfortably, creeping pleasure with far less aches compared to the morning, some advantages to their mandated break after all.

Her hands come to rest against the sure foundation of his chest, nails digging into giving skin over sinewy scar tissue as she nears new climax. He’s not the only one to be surprised by what the other does to them, she’d reflect if she wasn’t more focused on chasing it out. Because she requires nothing more of him than his presence and needy sounds of encouragement as she comes.

“That’s my girl.” Things he’d never say elsewhere, as she rides it out with heaving breath and even grinding on top of him. A little more familiar is the hint of authority as his palms brush up her shivery body to cover her breasts, then keep rising to take a gentle hold of her neck before he says, “Again.”

She gasps, leaning into the grip. “Yes Daud.” The intoxicating pressure against her throat robs her of any desire except to keep riding him harder, fighting her instincts to tense up and snatching deep breaths as she keeps herself relaxed enough to drive straight into another dizzying climax. One of his hands shifts away from her neck as she comes again, covering her mouth to make untamed noises into, lest she let slip any easily-overheard sounds that wouldn’t leave much to the imagination.

Stilling as she trembles with the aftershocks, she shifts her knees to change her purchase on the bed and lifts herself up almost enough to slip out. There’s a slight pressure as she comes back down, bringing Daud past the tightest point of her, and the wanton groan through his teeth is music to her ears. She bottoms out with a further noise into his palm, then every subsequent time she comes back down over him.

“Here,” she requests from an uncovered mouth, taking his wrist and moving his hand down between her legs. She feels him flexing back into the bed – a sprung board under her – as he draws in air like a pump and obligingly circles a thumb over her. From there, the lines of what really constitutes a peak and valley of her pleasure get blurry. She just cedes to the powerful rhythm, bringing him along with her as his hand leaves her throat to cover a bouncing breast.

“Please, Em,” rises like steam in his breath. “I’m gonna come.”

“Yes,” she mumbles distantly, legs beginning to tire but so caught up that she doesn’t even consider stopping, just curls her nails into him and keeps going. A strangled noise she recognises the nuances of slips out of Daud, followed by hand that shifts to her hip and abruptly stills her. “Did you-?” she starts disjointedly, feeling a waning pulsing sensation within.

“Tried warning you,” he murmurs sluggishly.

“I didn’t think you meant right now,” she pants, considering the development. “… Oh well,” she sighs.

“Oh well?” he echoes. “You understand the implication?”

“Possible implication,” she counters, careful as she starts to lift off him. “Do you have something to clean up?”

“No,” he answers in careful whispers, though if Thomas has heard by now there’s probably little point. “Wasn’t exactly prepared for you to sneak in the window and fuck my brains out.” She smiles, enjoying him like this – the easy peace of immediate satisfaction, disarmed enough to talk to her like he’s forgotten all the terrible things that he’ll remind himself of before considering
anything good that might happen to him.

“That’s entirely on you,” she maintains as she unmounts, teeth clicking together as the feeling changes. “You know how I feel about sleeping upstairs.” And the flipside, how she feels about being down here. With him.

“You don’t seem overly concerned,” he says as she settles in alongside him, clammy skin pressed together as she finds a comfortable way to lie. Her pillow is still down here, so how he was expecting her to sleep upstairs without one seems a little hard to believe.

“If I make a mess of the sheets it’s as much your fault as mine,” she comments lazily, dragging her mouth up a stretch of his shoulder as she bends a knee to rest over his legs.

“Not that,” he murmurs. “The… other possibility.”

“Ah,” she acknowledges, fingering his chest until she finds her scar on him, raised up from the others as his flesh knits back together. “I don’t think it’ll be a problem.” She feeds her other arm through his, twisted around him with a cheek to his shoulder so that she might breathe in the smell of him that’s so inherently satisfying.

“It could be a big one,” he replies like it even needs saying.

“You don’t have to tell me,” she comes back, careful whispers that probably wouldn’t be distinguishable but could certainly be heard by anyone bothering to listen. “We shalln’t have to wait too long to find out, I suspect,” she adds – while there are such herbal and backalley technologies to see to a problem such as the one he’s preoccupied with, she knows her cycle and suspects it’s close to coming around and settling the matter. “If nothing else it gives me an excuse to stay a little longer.”

“That’s hardly a plan,” Daud murmurs, not doing much to stop her insinuating herself around him. If anything he softens to her presence, not so much as a whisper of her going back to her own room on his lips.

“Don’t fuss so,” she soothes groggly, letting her eyes close. “It’ll be fine. Probably.”

He turns so she feels the shadow of his jaw over her forehead, ghost of his lips tracing her skin as he relents. “Very well, highness.” He lays a kiss against her brow, entwined around her like trained willow. “Then goodnight.” She flexes, squeezing him for a moment as she wonders how someone who’d wrought so much terror can be capable of such heart-wrenching tenderness.

“Goodnight, Daud.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh? Did y'all think they were done falling out with (while also still falling for) each other? But then how would the overfeelsy makeup sex happen?? I also feel like this portion of SPICE should probably come with a 'count the kinks' bingo card, cuz... seriously. We've met dom!Daud once or twice now, but welcome to the magical world of low-key high-key sub!Daud, because let's be real there's no way Emily isn't a hell of
a top and/or power bottom when she wants to be. All Hail Empress Kaldwin. ALL. HAIL.

As always, the thing is, I wrote this trash for my own entertainment first and foremost (and how) so if anyone doesn't like it then, okay, no problem. That's not sarcastic, it's really okay. I'm aware of being a walking smut factory and this is just gonna be what it is, which is yanno. Sweet(?) n' Spicy-fest. I obviously would not recommend Emily's approach to birth control, but I've actually done the dates well enough that it's plausibly unlikely for her to be, yanno, ovulating and stuff at this point in the timeline. Just bc I'm a nerd like that.

Finally managed to slip a bit of Billie background in there too! Daud is really super Not Okay about the whole KoD stuff really. Being so "fine" and all. I also do a mental fistpump whenever Emily *actually* apologises for something.

As always, hope y'all enjoyed and see you next week! Welcome aboard to a couple recent passengers to turn up in the comments, happy to have brought you into the (spicy, trash) fold ;}
The Fifty-Second Lesson

Chapter Summary

A moment of quiet.

Chapter Notes

Chaptering happens as it happens, and this one happens to be full of nice things. Enjoy!

This also takes us over 170k, which is a ridiculous length for a story about two stubborn people dancing around each other, but here we are.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘Emily’

Her name comes from the throes of desperately satisfying sleep, through which she’s only vaguely aware of her surroundings. A gentle shifting of the matter underneath her is followed by, “Emily, love,” in the absence of a response; a gentle purr that she doesn’t really register, committed as she is to continued slumber. The shifting turns to a jostle, accompanied by fingers that sweep hair from her face.

“Hmm?” she issues inarticulately, less than half-sure of what she thinks he said, and the better part of her devoted to remaining firmly asleep.

“It’s time to wake up.”

“How’d you figure that?” she says without opening her eyes, the single sheet and Daud’s body heat in addition to her own somehow creating the perfect temperature in the cool of the early morning.

“Sun’s up.” She knows what he’s doing, insidiously drawing her out with conversation.

“That’s no reason to get up.” In protest she winds herself more closely around him, face tucking into the curve of his shoulder.

“For you perhaps.” While she can groggily appreciate this is still a positive step from getting up without her, it’s hardly what she wants to hear at a godforsaken hour of the morning. “Also, Thomas won’t be around just yet.” She frowns against his neck, then huffs before finally opening her eyes one at a time. The dawning light only barely fills the room, but she can make out Daud’s features looking over her. Emily finds herself trying to remember if she’d heard what she thought she had while she was still more asleep than not.

“Fine,” she concedes begrudgingly, “but you’re making the coffee.”

“Very well.” Daud is then finally permitted to start getting up around her. Though the temptation to go back to sleep is very real, his point about Thomas is apt, and if Emily would not like to be seen
sloping out of Daud’s room in a highly compromising state then she'd be wise to follow his example.

She watches Daud stretch after getting out of bed over the top of her, the well-formed structure of his back laced with scars. The picture as her gaze moves down is enough to make her consider why getting out of bed is such a great idea in the first place, but he dresses methodically and takes a step towards the door before she can think to stop him.

“Wait,” she calls out before he leaves her behind. “I don’t have any clothes.”

“What?” He turns over his shoulder to cast a glance at her that soon turns into a dazed lingering of his eyes across her form. She should think her so twisted up naked in his bedsheets would be quite the distraction.

“Not that I can wear outside.” The flimsy nightclothes she wore last night hardly make for decency, not to mention a mess was made of her top, which suffered for being the closest thing to hand to clean up before a worse state could be made of the bedding. “They’re all upstairs.”

He crosses his arms and issues a steely. “That is a problem for you.”

“Not if you go get me some.”

“I suppose you expect me to dress you as well?”

“You did undress me,” she points out cheekily, “so it would be fair compensation.” She watches him roll his eyes upwards, like he’s looking through the roof. Then they close and are suddenly completely black upon opening, darkness she can see overflowing through the veins and arteries around his sockets. The transfixing horror of it only lasts only a moment before he shuts them again and all is normal.

“Fine,” he concedes in an abrupt end to the battle.

“What was that?” she asks as he starts to make for the window.

“Void gaze,” Daud explains ordinarily. “Checking Thomas is still where he’s supposed to be.” While finding Daud sneaking around in the Empress’s room picking up her clothes wouldn’t technically be as bad as her being discovered stark naked sneaking back into her own room, neither are particularly appealing outcomes for the morning. “You haven’t seen Corvo do it?”

“He tries to keep his powers hidden from me,” she relates cynically, inspecting the mark stood out perfectly on the back of her own hand – one she might even wear for herself, one day. “Obviously, you can see how well that’s worked.” Daud scoffs and turns back for the window.

“Then he was foolish to send you to me,” Daud says, though not quite like he regrets it. Corvo’s misjudgement is their gain, she can’t help but feel as he climbs onto the ledge of the window.

“So how does it work?” she presses before he’s gone. “Can I use it?”

“Maybe,” he answers first, “and later.” Then he’s gone, out the window and presumably up onto the roof the way she came, though she can’t claim to hear any footsteps or sounds that would betray him.

He returns moments after, appearing in the middle of the floor through the open window with a handful of mixed dark-and-light clothing that he tosses onto the bed on top of her.
“That room,” he comments slowly in what she could accuse as his most lecturing drawl, “is a mess.”

She hurls the bundle of clothes he’s just heaved on her back at him, flying apart in the air and drifting down near his feet. He catches her shirt on a finger, lifting it up as he addresses her with a scolding look.

“You should see my quarters back in Dunwall,” she attempts light-heartedly, only to strike herself with the notion that there’s no way he would. It sparks a melancholy he seems to share, hidden in the changing mood of the look he gives her before proffering the shirt back. “Wait,” she calls again as he starts turning away. “I thought you were going to help me dress?”

“I don’t recall being your servant.” He’s a little tart if not outright bad-natured, though Emily’s attempts to delay him leaving the room finally collapse when he makes it all the way to the door. “If you want me I’ll be in the kitchen.” If she’s learned a single thing about Daud in all this time, including his more amorous inclinations, she’s certain the way he says it is entirely intentional.

“Wait,” she calls after him, wriggling into a pair of cut-off trousers and stuffing her arms into shirt sleeves. “I’m coming, all right.” He seems vaguely impressed at how quickly she goes from naked to clothed, catching up with him by the time they’re at the open door, which he blocks her going through with an arm.

“Not so fast.” She halts and faces him as he stops her with a gentle touch, watching as he brings his hands together and reaches for the front of her shirt. With a desperately focused look, he precisely runs his fingers up the fastenings to correct some wrongly matched buttons, before doing up a few more than she’d bothered with. After all that noise about not dressing her, as well.

“Better?” she prompts farcically when his hands still and move down to his sides, and when his eyes flick up to hers she could swear she feels the heat in them.

“Not really,” he murmurs contemplatively, “but it’ll have to do. Come on.” He swings a hand to bat lightly at her backside, which is equal parts scandalising and delightful. Emily is surprised by how easily she allows herself to be so shooed through the door.

“Do you really get up this early every day?” Emily strolls into the kitchen just ahead of Daud, early sunlight casting long shadows across the floor.

“Most days,” he answers hoarsely, ducking into the storeroom just behind her before following into the main room, setting a glass jar that could be a hand-blown with a cloth-covered lid down on the counter. “Finest time for temperature.” She won’t deny that it’s pleasantly balmy, heading straight through to the door outside to stand in the delightful early sun as her head slowly follows the rest of her body in wakefulness. “Bring back some water if you’re going that way,” he notes, and she simply nods before setting off to the wash-area.

He’s crouched in front of the stove when she returns, scraping around inside the lower chamber with one of the tools from the hearth.

“Anything else I can do?” She sets a bucket of water on the table and settles in behind it; she doesn’t want to seem spoiled, but quite likes the idea of watching him work rather than doing too much of it herself.

“Just keep out of the way,” he answers easily, which could be construed as an insult if it wasn’t
exactly what she wanted. Resting her head in her hand, Emily wakes slow as she takes in this new routine for the first time; lighting a fire in the stove before getting out a wide clay bowl and a few other implements and containers.

Daud tips flour into the bowl plus a few pinches of salt, and then with freshly washed hands makes a dent in the middle. He tips liquid from the jar that’d come from the pantry to pool in the middle, holding the bowl with one hand and plying through the powder with the other.

“Where did you learn?” she asks as he adds a little more water and works the dough with precise motions.

“What?” he asks with his eyes trained on what he’s doing, tipping the dough out with little warning and scraping sticky tendrils from the bowl and his hand with a wooden spatula-like tool.

“This,” she says with a roll of her own eyes that he misses. “I can’t see a master assassin needing to pass as a baker.” It’s a joke of sorts, or lands like one at least, a hint of a smile stretching his mouth at the notion.

“You’d be surprised,” he murmurs into the work, sticking his fingers underneath the gloopy dough and stretching it before folding it over and quickly lifting and turning it around, only to repeat the process again with practised motions. “The trader taught me,” he explains a moment later.

“Let me guess,” she interjects. “She insisted?”

“I did, actually,” he corrects. “She baked once and I…” he pauses for a second, “realised what I’d been missing.” That and how much else, she wonders.

“Did she teach you to cook those Pandyssian dishes as well?” she asks instead, and he gives a throaty “hm” in affirmation.

“She stays longer on the way back,” he adds, stretching out the dough until it becomes almost transparent and then balling it back together, rolling it under his hands. “Especially the first few years, must have thought I could use the company.”

“Couldn’t you?” she poses.

“I’ll take it or leave it, most times,” he remarks with a pointed glance up at her, and returns thoughtfully to his bread. “Though… there’s something she said when she left,” he murmurs into the folding dough. “I didn’t share with you at the time.”

“I imagine there’s much to that effect,” she replies knowingly. Such as the repeated insistence of the sensibility his marrying her, albeit from a slightly misinformed position.

“This was meant for you,” he reveals, and seems a little like he’s regretting the decision to bring it up at all, hesitant to draw the words out of himself. “The reason for the gift she gave you when she left.”

“The oil?” she specifies.

“Hm,” he confirms, “It was her thanks to you because she’d never … seen me so happy,” it clearly pains him to say it, like putting weight on a sore tendon.

“Oh.” Emily realises why he wouldn’t have translated something quite so raw at the time – at least until now. “Well… you’re welcome, I suppose.” There’s a noise as he scoops up the dough and flops it back into the bowl, scraping off his hands and then turning away to wash them off. “What
now?" she finds herself asking the silence that’s not quite comfortable.

“For the bread?” he queries with a hint of humour that takes some of the prickle out of the moment. “Wait for it to rise.”

“How long does that take?”

“Couple hours,” he answers, setting the dish on top of the stove that’s still warming as the fire inside it gets going, though still not hot enough to boil coffee

“Wait,” she seizes. “Are you suggesting we have hours to kill?”

“Not in the least,” he comes back “There’s plenty to be done around here before it gets hotter.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” she comes back sordidly, but he’s not budging.

“Returning to bed is a backwards step,” he warns, and she’s at least affirmed that he’s acknowledged the suggestion. “And Thomas could wake up.”

“Not if you can keep quiet,” she teases. “For once.”

“Behave yourself.” This time the way he says it is unlike the others, bearing an undercurrent that makes her wonder what might happen if she didn’t.

“You recall that I live to contradict you?” Daud suddenly takes the time and dedication to lean over the table across from Emily, towering above her with arms propped out on either side, containing her in his presence.

“I do,” he answers ruggedly, and there’s a space between them that jumps with electricity. “Yet you might also recall,” he continues, “that I like making you wait.”

She wets lips with her tongue and half-considers darting up to him like a lizard pouncing on an insect, if she didn’t know that he’d be just as likely to pull away – especially if he’s in this kind of mood.

“So when Thomas wakes up?” she points out, fingering her jaw as she looks up at him and runs a precise calculation of exactly how much it would take for him to fall apart completely.

“Then your second chance at the challenge you failed begins.”

“You were going to show me that power,” Emily comments from the hammock as Daud returns from a shower she’d almost considered spying on – again – if she hadn’t succeeded in striking an extraordinarily comfortable position within the sling. It’s still early enough that she’s reluctant to get up, resisting the urge to doze outright. “The one with the eyes.”

“Void gaze,” Daud fills in, combing water from his hair with his fingers and blessedly relieved of a shirt thus far. He passes close enough by her to reach out and catch him with a hand like she’s fishing, reeling him slowly in with a tantalising smirk.

“Let me see,” she requests with him on the other end of her arm, still cool under her touch fresh from the shower. Beads of water trapped in the hair of his chest occasionally run down his front, reconnecting with a trail that stretches from his navel down past his waistband that she’s somehow only just now taken notice of. When she looks back up at his face his eyes are black again,
frightening and exciting at the same time, the creeping darkness that spills out of his eyes to stretch across his face like cracks in a mask.

“It lets you see in the dark, and through some walls,” he explains, and then turns up to the upper floor of the house. “He’s still asleep.”

“Good.” She tugs him assertively to bend down and meet her, close enough to wind her other arm around his neck and haul him right up to the doorstep of her mouth. “I can hear it,” she gasps as his Outsider-black eyes loom blurrily above hers, a godless hissing that echoes from him like pressing her ear to a seashell.

“Follow it,” he guides, a hand coasting blindly down her arm until he fingers the lines of her mark. It seems to respond to his touch, lighting up with a flaring sensation that makes her gasp in surprise. “The void is always there, right beneath our reality, so just as you move through for traversal, you see through it with the gaze.”

His hand tightens around hers into a proper grip, and Emily feels the throb of the arcane bond between them. She makes a noise that would ordinarily be restricted to the bedroom as the touch drives a pulse through her, a pressure gathering around her eyes like the start of a monster headache.

“Relax,” he says like he can sense her resistance. “You have to move with, not against it.” He leads with a nose nuzzling over her face as the dark energy pours into her, and she wonders if he ever assisted others with the use of his powers like this.

When the pressure finally bursts, it hits with a release that’s not entirely pure; whether that’s inherent in the power or more to the effect of how Daud has pushed it upon her unknown. She has no sooner let out a shaky pant than his lips seal over hers like he means to capture the soul blowing straight out of her. It’s a momentary contact before he comes away with everything outlined in new lines, tinted a greyish blue like she’s wearing some of Piero’s metalworking glasses.

“There you go,” he congratulates, shining like a sun in this new landscape, and she feels his fingertips come around the edge of her eye sockets, pressing down almost therapeutically before he turns to face upwards. “Can you see him?”

She follows the gaze and can make out a throbbing yellow-gold up in the house, peering straight through walls like greased paper to make out the prone human shape at rest in one of the upstairs rooms.

“Yes Daud,” she answers dutifully.

“That’s my girl.” Emily has taken all she can stand, so closes the clutch of her arms to pull him into a wanton kiss. “Easy,” he says over her lips as they twist together and apart like the workings of a machine, forehead pressed to hers and fingertips along a cheekbone. “No good getting worked up now.”

“Why?” she counters, casting another look at the fixed light in the mid-ground, like a lantern lit by living. Daud, correspondingly, doesn’t shine in quite the same way, a reflection of his patronage, perhaps. “He’s not going anywhere.”

“And if he wakes while we’re otherwise occupied?” Daud hints, still letting another kiss be stolen off his mouth.

“He’d have to catch us in the act.”
“He’s not a fool,” he replies. Even if it would make a lot of things easier. “It wouldn’t take much.”

“Then we swear him to secrecy,” she reasons. “Or cut out his tongue.”

“Emily.”

“I’m joking,” she retorts with a roll of her eyes, inadvertently reverting to normal vision, still with her arms locked around his neck as he stoops over her in the hammock. “It wouldn’t work anyway.” Not with Daud’s insistence on literacy for his people. She goes in to kiss him again and is surprised when he turns the contact against his jaw so her lips run across the fuzz of his stubble.

“The stove should be hot enough for coffee now,” he comments like he doesn’t know what he’s doing. He moves to stand up, but Emily refuses to release him, so he resorts to hauling her along with him, lifting her in a low-effort scoop that he seems to accept is the easiest option.

“Coffee?” she echoes with an arm looped around his neck, swinging her feet freely over the iron bar of his under her legs as he carries her inside. “That’s still your priority?”

“It’ll do for one,” he concedes, setting her down on the end of the kitchen table and going to the stove, prodding his dough and moving it onto a shelf above the stove before reaching for the coffee pot.

While he’s setting it to boil she conceives of an idea, so tools herself to focus on a stretch of counter nearby, right in front of the sugar pot as a matter of fact. Without too much overexertion she manages to traverse across the space, landing in much the same pose in a different location. He reacts to her sudden relocation subtly, but still not enough to escape her notice.

“You’re in my way,” he observes as he reaches the point of needing to pass through the space she now occupies.

“I know,” she replies. “That was rather the point.” He settles an arm low around her and tries to slide her out of the way, but she puts down her hands to resist the movement. “Daud,” she cajoles, looking right at him with little left to the imagination.

“When will you be satisfied?” he bemoans, but concedes to sliding her forward rather than sideways, legs either side of him and their bodies flush as his hands tie in a loose sling around her waist.

“Certainly not while you desire the sugar pot more than me,” she baits, reaching for it to shake indicatively between them. He relinquishes hold on her to take the receptacle, but with his other hand sets two fingers under her jaw, holding her gaze straight to his.

“Not demonstrating something to you constantly does not mean it’s not a constant,” he lectures in a tone that she could tap for its own sugars. Yet rather than kiss her already, Daud seems intent to devote himself to the close examination of her face, like he’s memorising it for safekeeping.

“What does that mean?”

“Not to doubt that I desire you,” he issues simply, and all of this really just makes Emily want to return to bed more. But for whatever reason, Daud doesn’t appear to be similarly inclined, setting down the sugar pot at her side.

“Then what are you waiting for?” she throws openly, not disguising her wants lest he try to obscure his own. She knows she’s got him on the line for the way he looks at her, and the hand that leaves the lid of the sugar pot to run around the width of her thigh, wrapped in shortened trousers whose
ends are starting to fray after she cut the legs off with her dagger all those weeks ago.

“I have other things to attend to,” he rumbles like far-off thunder. Emily considers this place is a constant in a way that she’s not; after her departure it will still be here, and she wonders if it’s easier for him to hold onto routine for that reason.

“Oh then I… understand, I suppose,” she concedes, a little deflated. The coffee pot nearby starts to gurgle, soon to be ready. “Can we at least have coffee?”

Daud smiles, leaning in to lay a brush of his lips at the corner of his mouth. Emily knows that he knows he can do more, so if he chooses less then it isn’t without reason, nor will any amount of protest from her change such inclinations. But even so, there’s still not much he’ll deny her.

Chapter End Notes

I had a good old laugh about the idea of Daud's arcane bond having a rather *stimulating* effect on people he forms it with - which he's completely oblivious to, of course. Whalers sweating as they try to cover up the awkward boners of Daud upgrading their powers, the sheer relief when it's bashfully mentioned and they're like OH GOD YOU TOO I THOUGHT IT WAS JUST ME. You know, high brow stuff.

This is a very cute chapter I think, even with Thomas here they're able to get a bit of time together, though there's some boundaries and learning going on too. Emily's getting the hang of realising that whenever *she* wants sex =/= time for sex. Bless.

As always, hope y'all are well and see you next week!
The Fifty-Third Lesson

Chapter Summary

The cool of the morning turns hot.

Chapter Notes

Time for the continuation of the cockblock Olympics 2017.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

An unpleasant reality of Daud’s place is it being notably bereft of comfortable seating – at least, outside of the hammock or his room. Neither being quite suitable under the circumstances, Emily resolves to the taking of morning coffee from the comforts of his lap. Something he’s permitted surreptitiously bereft of complaints.

Daud hasn’t quite gotten around to putting on a shirt yet, either, though he’s resistant about returning to bed. Emily can begrudgingly appreciate it might be considered a backwards step, given the risk of their being caught in a rather compromising position.

Granted, this position is pretty compromising, but it’s a little quicker to jump out of if nothing else. Emily also catches him watching the house, sometimes with his eyes blacked out as he keeps watch on their slightly-less-than-welcome guest. She tries it herself with the void gaze once or twice, but ends up more interested in a catalogue of the scars that mar his skin.

“What about this one?” she queries out of the echoing depths of her half-empty cup, thumbing the lesser scar above his left brow.

“Knuckle duster.” Daud swills his coffee in one hand, the other arm wrapped around Emily, her weight even across his legs on the bench and back to the table.

“What?”

“Card game gone bad.”

Emily hums thoughtfully and trails her attention down to his chest. “Here,” she names, reaching for a perfectly straight scar just verging on his left brow.

“Morley.” Daud answers. “During the Troubles. Bayonet went right through me, you can see it on the back too.” She moves her head around to check, passing her cup over to the arm slung around her balance, and sure enough finds a matching shape higher up on his back.

The next one she doesn’t say anything, merely draws her fingers over it; a long gash in his side, opposite to the one she put in him. She can see where this larger cut was sealed shut with hot metal rather than stitched, a nasty mess of burns and the wound itself.

“You can thank Corvo for that,” Daud offers without invitation, taking a sip and bouncing her on
his knees a few times.

“He might have done worse.” He doesn’t argue that with her. She catches his arm before he lowers it and turns it over, a slice through the side of his forearm that stands out in snowy contrast to the tanned skin around it.

“That,” he says a little more reluctantly, “was Lurk.”

“The infamous?” It’s a gentle probe, knowing they’ve stumbled onto a tenderer wound than the others.

“Mucked up while sparring and almost took my arm off,” he rumbles like far-off thunder.

“Then she must have been good.”

“She was,” he says shortly. “Best sword I ever had.”

“Best?” Emily echoes in a loaded tone, and Daud’s eyes roll sideways to catch hers.

“You don’t count.” If Emily was of an understanding disposition, she might count that as flattery. She’s not totally convinced she is.

“What was she to you?” There’s a twist to Daud’s mouth as Emily tugs on nerves she knows are still raw, passing her coffee back to her other hand and taking a sip that’s a poor cover for her anticipation.

“Someone I trusted.” Then, detecting the hint of possession in her tone. “We weren’t like this, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Like what?” Emily feigns, and Daud shifts her in his lap, a low noise from his throat before his mouth brushes across her neck. “Oh,” she rewards with a faint sigh, hand gripping his shoulder tighter, “like that.”

“You enjoy making an exception of yourself,” he murmurs against her, mouth even hotter than usual from the newly boiled coffee.

“Are you saying I’m not exceptional?”

“But if you don’t love hearing it.” Daud lets himself be led into a meandering kiss, coffee-tongued and a hand squeezing her thigh as she sits across him. “Easy, girl,” he warns when they break apart. Emily pouts in a clear show of frustration, which he seems to find endearing.

“Your dedication to delayed gratification continues to astound me,” she abuses over-verbosely.

“If last night proved anything,” he dares to put into words, “it’s that you won’t fail to get your way with me sooner or later.” Daud’s jaw comes steadily on and off her neck, sometimes with a calculated scrape of teeth – which is not helping, but Emily suspects he knows that. “So don’t make that face at me.”

“I just fail to see what’s wrong with sooner among these options,” she challenges.

“Spare an old man’s endurance.”

“You endance?” She tries to give him a terribly disapproving look and doesn’t get her head far enough around. “Nice try.”
Daud merely chuckles at being caught out. The fact of it is, he’s plenty susceptible to flattery, and worse yet gets satisfaction out of making her wait, knowing – as he finally does – that she wants him. Fair penance, Emily supposes, given her recent interest in the depths of his desire. Though her favourite way of finding out just how much Daud wants her is by how quickly she can break him – and it appears to set them at odds.

“Come.” He bobs her on his knees again before draining the last of his coffee. “I want to check on the bread.”

“Oh the bread,” she mocks, crossing her wrists behind Daud’s neck for a moment as she turns into him. Their mouths cross paths in a simple peck that could classify as worryingly affectionate, kissing not as a precursor to carnal gratification but purely for its own comfort. It’s not really something she’s been inclined to in the past, and Emily finds herself musing over the way this… thing has affected her. Emily hops out of Daud’s lap rather quickly, eliciting a noise from him that makes her think she’s doing more than she realises merely by being where she is than anything she says or does.

She follows him inside and watches as he investigates then start to manhandle the dough in a way that she ought not be envious of, but sort of is. Searching for something else to do aside from getting ever-more frustrated, Emily eventually goes back to his room and claims the little-used instrument from its place on the wall.

Daud is reshaping the bread with floured hands when she comes back out, then tips it into some kind of wicker basket that he lays a damp cloth over the top of, setting it on the windowsill where it catches a hint of the early sun as it starts to grow stronger.

“You’re going to play?” It’s a redundant observation but she’ll not begrudge him for chattiness any time soon.

“Well you’ve rejected my first choice, and we can’t all fill our mornings with a preoccupation for baking bread.” She leans against the end of the kitchen table twanging the strings into tune. “Any requests?” He gives her a lingering look from the counter, dusting of flour spread out in front of him.

“Come here.”

“One of my favourites,” she quips with a wicked smirk. Emily sidles over to Daud and he turns around to lean against the worktop, steering her by the hips – then a little lower – to rest in front of him.

“You ready for a lesson?” he slurs in her ear, and she thumbs a string with fingers on the tuning peg, pitching it up until the note sweetens, then strumming the open chord.

“For you, I suppose so,” she graciously concedes.

Daud’s hands finally leave her body to take hold of the instrument around her. “Like this,” he leads, and she watches him finger a chord with hands slightly too big for the neck, followed by a quick slide and then a minor. “Now the picking pattern,” he introduces next, producing a tune that pours out in a methodical loop far smoother than she’s heard from him before.

“What is it?” she asks, focusing intensely on the continued thrum of his hands as she memorises the melody.

“Old Serkonian song,” he answers. “One of the first I learned.” And one of the few he could really
play. He pours it out again another time, a warm melody that seems to match their setting so well, a warm summer breeze drifting what’s still pleasingly through the open kitchen in the early morning.

“Let me try,” Emily says when she thinks she’s seen enough. Daud stops, allowing her to take the instrument without changing their position, which seems to please him just fine. She starts to play slowly at first, but gets through the tune correctly, then faster the next time around.

“Very good,” Daud purrs. Midway through her next cycle, Emily gets her fingers out of order when he draws back her yet-to-be put up hair with a hand and applies a kiss like postage to the back of her neck. “Ah, I take it back,” he teases as she falters, voice buzzing against her skin.

“You distracted me.”

“So?” He adds another such kiss for each break in his speech, dotted like punctuation throughout his lines. “Distraction is everywhere.” Another one. “That’s your lesson.” He presses lower down her neck, mouth hot over the top of her spine. “Keep playing,” he instructs, and Emily takes a steeling breath before recapturing the tune, resisting the urge to shudder or roll back into him as he covers her inch by inch with soft mouth and scratchy jaw.

“You need a shave,” she says, losing her place when he adds a scrape of teeth to the stubble. She wonders if this is fun for him. He just hums, moving a hand to brush her thigh again, before spreading across the front of her hip and pulling her more firmly into him. “Daud,” she finds herself warning, because he can’t just mouth her neck with her back pressed to his front like this and call it a lesson.

As if butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth, he soothes a “Yes?” across a tender stretch of her neck.

“This is a rather unique form of distraction,” she lobbies to a seemingly indifferent judge and jury.

“Hm,” he affirms, perhaps just caring about something different.

“I thought you had other matters to attend to?” Emily struggles through the refrain one more time.

“Later.” Like a time when Daud hasn’t got her pulse beating against his lips.

“Oh, now you want to talk of later?” Emily finally abandons the tune and instrument, flipping around to face him.

“I don’t know what to tell you.” One of his one of his hands is settled very inarguably over her rear. “You got me.” His resistance has boiled off like an early morning mist, profile dancing around hers as if he can’t figure out to fit them together – when he knows perfectly well.

“That’ll do just fine.” Finally they lock into the kiss, Emily falling into Daud as far as she’ll go. His arms wrap surely around her; a pleasure so singularly uncomplicated in the doing that it seems nothing that feels this good can truly be a bad thing.

However, that doesn’t stop them springing apart like a surge of current runs through them when footsteps thump out on the stairs. Daud gives Emily a disjointed look, confused arousal and half-hard before he turns back to the counter, while she snatches up the instrument and goes in the other direction. Whether any of this helps impressions as Thomas slopes into the kitchen earlier than either of them appear to expect is debatable.

“I heard music,” he says groggily.

“Guilty as charged,” Emily confesses, like it might help disguise any other culpable appearance.
“You’re both up early,” he comments, and she rationally knows it isn’t meant to be an accusation, so any hearing of it on her part is surely up to interpretation.

“Well it gets rather hot upstairs,” she stilts, a little pleased with herself for the lie. Thomas is spending much of his time looking at her, but that’s hardly unprecedented in this household. She surely cuts an unusual picture, hair down in half-shredded clothing and the fadings of a sex flush in her face.

“You’re not wrong.” Thomas leads them into a moment that becomes well and truly awkward.

“Bring some water from the pump if you’re headed that way,” Daud suddenly instructs with more than the usual streak of authority in his tone; it’s a flat order disguised as a request, directed in such a way as to hark of past dynamics where his word was his command.

“Yes—… sure,” Thomas delivers like he might not even be fully awake yet, some latent programming from half a lifetime ago rousing instinctively only to be messily put down. He slopes out of the kitchen along a straight line that he came in on, rhythmic paces past the window as he rounds the house and heads off toward the pump.

He’s no sooner out of range than a rugged growl erupts from Daud, “Goddam- come here,” he heaves a sigh, wringing his hands in a dishcloth before reaching insistently for her with all kinds of concern scored across his face.

Emily is a little confused, but allows herself be led back into him. She only realises when Daud starts brushing her shorts with a palm how floury fingers have told a tale of the way his hands were wandering until Thomas’s interruption.

“Oh.” She sees to some of the smudges herself. “Do you think he noticed?”

“Not if he was too busy staring at this.” Daud plucks her hand out of the air, running his thumb across the back of her it. A sliver of light flashes across the mark as if sparked by his touch, lighting a flutter inside her that would rather lead him back to his bedroom by that hand than wrap it up to conceal such insignia of the bond between them. “Get it covered,” he says firmly, and she knows why it has to be.

If Thomas knows something, it’s surely a matter of time before Corvo does. And her… situation with Daud isn’t an issue she’s looking to discuss with anyone except him – and even then reluctantly.

“Yes Daud,” she says too soft, because he gives her a look that’s all agony. The easy flirtation of the morning driven back into the reclusive corners that it’s come from, he moves almost as if to kiss her but stops himself, holding impulse by the collar even while they’re so conspicuously close as to make no difference.

He finally unfastens his hand from around hers like he has to pry his own fingers back. “We have to be more careful.”

Emily wraps her hand and puts up her hair, presenting a marginally more respectable outward appearance as she re-emerges from the house, though she’s still chaos under the surface.

Thomas has just returned from Daud’s paper thin excuse of collecting water, setting the handle into his once-employer’s waiting hand a few steps onto the terrace. Daud turns and takes it into the
kitchen, moving past Emily with an unnamable stretch of carefully-preserved space between them, not so much as a glance as he navigates around her just in front of the doorway.

A thought like a bug whining past her ear points out they hadn’t been this carefully separate even when the trader visited, though things were different between them back then. It doesn’t stop her sparing a longing look at his back as he disappears inside without as much as acknowledging her.

“So what about this training?” Thomas prompts, settling on the outdoor table of the terrace. Emily is busy reasoning with herself that establishing a little space between herself and Daud is somewhere between advisable and necessary as they mutually calm down, and that his intent in ignoring her is nothing malicious.

“What?” she replies at first, not understanding what Thomas is talking about with her attention fixed firmly elsewhere – like catching a glance of Daud through the window as he decants water into a tapped vat she’s never even questioned the filling of as a chore, operating it as if plumbed in all this time without considering the work he puts in unseen.

“That you need to finish before returning to the Capital,” Thomas supplies.

“O… of course,” she fumbles. “We’ll… I mean, it’ll be attended to shortly.”

“You don’t appear to be in much of a rush, if you don’t mind my saying,” Thomas comments, and Emily rather wishes she had the script of hidden instructions Corvo must have equipped him with, instead of having to walk over all the tightropes and tripwires the hard way.

“Neither the seasons nor harvest care for my title or importance of my training,” she says with an aloof tilt of her head. “Daud’s duties to them take precedence sometimes.” A longhand for saying that he doesn’t, and there’s not a damn thing she can do to compel him in a direction he truly doesn’t want to go.

The notion that she’s ultimately at his behest is received oddly by Thomas, though it’s only the latest in a long line of peculiarities between herself and Daud that she suspects will need some diplomatic settling before their return to the Capital.

“For all the Empress would have the world revolve around her, she’s quite right,” Daud announces upon strolling out of the kitchen, breaking the silence before Thomas can voice any of the bemusement written in his expression. It’s a shame the world isn’t so orientated, Emily reflects, as then Thomas would be a hundred miles away and she and Daud’s slow tumble back into bed this morning uninterrupted. “I suppose I can make an exception – this once,” he tacks on like he hasn’t been making a question mark out of his spine for her – if he’s so inclined. Daud’s insidious habit of granting her anything she wants, except when he doesn’t.

“Then pray tell, what joys has the programme to offer me today?” Emily returns in a way that might perhaps be mistaken for flirting if not careful, which she’s indecisively resolved to be. It’s a little reminder for Daud, to be sure he doesn’t try to put what’s going on between them aside again.

“Seeing as we have another swordsman to hand, this is a fine opportunity for you to practice against multiple opponents.” That explains the pair of sabres in Daud’s hands. Emily looks to the far end of the terrace where her own is propped against the end of the table – a carelessness she’d have been mortified by not so long ago.

“So, something I’ll enjoy for once.”

“I don’t recall being here for your pleasure, Empress,” he returns on well sharpened wits, and the
fleeting look as their eyes catch confirms exactly how intentional it is, which is entirely. Emily’s gut twists, and she recalls why they’re supposed to be being careful in the first place.

“Perish the thought,” she says less beguilingly, watching Daud watch Thomas for an opportunity to fling her another heated gaze. He tosses the sabre to Thomas, who catches it like all of this is a Very Bad Idea – not that any such notion has ever stopped them before. Then Daud uses the pull to snatch Emily’s from across the terrace, and throws it to her with another flash of fire.

“Do you need to be eased in, or have you done this before?” Daud’s question seems to knock Thomas even further out of his box than he already is – either unprepared for his infamously tough once-boss to show something like concern, or maybe just perturbed by the simmering chemistry between them that exists like it isn’t to be questioned.

“What’s your best guess?” Emily dashes into him with a few opening blows. If they can’t be physical in the preferred way, the least they can do is fight.

Daud retaliates with a hint of a grin, driving Emily deliberately towards Thomas, who seems initially to be too busy staring stupidly at them to join in. His involvement is something he ends up having little choice in, as the next time Emily rebuffs Daud she swings for Thomas without hesitation - best defence being offence and all that.

Thomas responds a little late but gets going soon enough, and in the ensuing scuffle Emily manages to seize an opportunity to move into Daud as she parries one of his strikes. Dashing up the length of his arm with careful sidesteps, she ensures he’s in-between herself and Thomas before locking his arm with a precise movement of her own, crumpling him as she applies a merciless amount of pressure.

Daud drops to his knees and she meets Thomas’s astonished gaze over the high peaks of his hairline. Seeing Daud brought down so quickly seems to remind Thomas what they’re supposed to be doing and he lobs a blow at her.

Avoiding the unremarkable strike is the only distraction Daud needs. In spite of what is surely a not insignificant amount of pain, he knocks her feet out from under her, and as quickly as she caught him he throws her to the floor. Emily lands hard on her back, gasping for air as Daud folds their tangled arms over to press her own blade against her neck.

“Looks like you could use some more practice.” Emily swears she can feel the heat of his body through every square inch of contact between them, each strangled breath she takes to regain the wind knocked out of her mainlining another dose of his proximity into her. If they were only alone, she despairs, staring at him as the cold of her rapier sits teasingly across her throat.

A hand appears over the back of Daud’s shoulder, which he and she both look at in utter astonishment. Their world has never had an intrusion such as this. Thomas tentatively draws Daud back like either of them required his intervention. As if she’s to be protected from him.

“Are you alright, your majesty?” he asks innocently enough, but the act is an unwelcome reminder of the perceived fragility Emily left in Dunwall, and at once infuriating.

“Fine,” she hisses, shoving Daud off her like he’s done anything wrong in this. Though in the innocuous shift of their bodies, she does manage to set her hand on top of his for a moment as she sits up, squeezing it tightly under her fingers with a volatile mix of frustration and reassurance. “Though I could be better.” As she gets back to her feet, Emily shoots a low glance at Daud still sprawled on the floor behind her; a look that’s received with full conviction that he knows exactly how she means.
Chapter End Notes

For funsies in my head the tune Daud uses for this chapter's 'lesson' is the opening of a song called Boy With a Coin by Iron and Wine.
The Fifty-fourth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily knows this has to be one of the most dangerous games yet, yet finds the prospect irresistible.

Chapter Notes

So this chapter goes with a special dedication to everyone who has picked up on the whole 'UST even though they've still had sex (multiple times)' thing that's been going, with a shout-out for Thedarknessfactor who pointed this out last week and I kept thinking about their comment while I was editing this chapter because... oh boy oh boy...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Though the trouble was started long ago, it definitely intensifies under the conditions of Emily wanting to interact with Daud in exactly the ways that she can’t. Too many questions would be spurned by the Empress’s use of ear-biting or strategic kissing for advantage in combat, so Emily has to suffice with laying her hands on Daud in purely combative ways. It makes matching him in sparring more challenging, to say nothing of having to fend off Thomas at the same time.

It is enlightening to see them fight together at least, the careful way all of Daud’s mercilessly drilled moves fit together to ensure neither gets in the other’s way as they fall on her like crashing waves. If Emily didn’t know Daud’s rigorously drilled arsenal in such detail, she’s sure it’d be a great deal harder to hold her own in the uneven match. As it is she manages to score on one or both of them before getting caught out herself most of the time.

Exhausted and with the sun finally starting to get uncomfortable, Emily fans the collar of her shirt from her sweat soaked chest. She wishes, not for the first time today, that she could’ve worn one of Daud’s shirt. Daud is by a leap and a mile the most composed of them all, though he still streams with sweat and has seemed clumsy at times, allowing mistakes that give Emily the drop on him more and more frequently. Daud gives her the opportunity time and again to twist him up in her hands like winding a scarf through them. It becomes quite the distraction, even if the exhaustion of fighting does dominate the greater part of her senses.

When Emily can’t endure another round without collapsing or doing something compromising to Daud, she grants them relief. “I think that’s enough for now.”

Thomas staggers over to the outside table and slumps over it with a heave of breath, and even Daud gives a long sigh and finally lets the fight slip from his body. Emily hadn’t quite realised the extent to which her signal was the one they were waiting for.

“A good show, Empress.” Daud seems to be testing the waters, given the way he watches Thomas instead of Emily. When the Whaler doesn’t stir from melting over the sturdy wooden table, Daud’s eyes flit over to Emily’s. “Help me in the kitchen, if you will.”
Emily follows him inside with an air of calm that is not at all indicative of her true feelings, something more in the air than the smell of freshly baked bread. So when Daud’s hands close around her shoulders not two steps inside Emily isn’t entirely surprised, though she’s certainly pleased. He moves her carefully against the cool stone wall immediately adjacent to the door, hidden from sight. The distance between them closes like an inevitability.

“So what kind of help did you require?” she hushes, breathing him in with a long inhale that rushes to her head before slipping downward. Daud’s hands slide in opposite directions, one up to trace the curve of her neck while the other finds her waist.

“The way you moved out there,” he says barely above a whisper, hot breath and hotter palms as he nudges her head into his hand with a nose and brushes a bristly jaw alongside hers before finding the junction with her throat. “I’ve never been so,” Her hands lay folded against his chest in the narrow space between them, but close tightly into fists when he breaks off to bring lip and teeth to the highest reaches of her neck.

“So what?”

Daud’s answer takes the form of his tongue trailing a stripe along the underside of her jaw. He seems to share Emily’s lack of concern about the sweat either of them have worked up, amounting to a heady scent that makes her carnal mind howl at her. Her chest is heaving with a much trickier breath to catch than from mere exercise.

When Daud’s mouthing of Emily seems to take over answering her question, she grabs his shirt and lifts, tugging as if to bring him closer even when there’s almost no empty space left. He doesn’t move.

If it weren’t for their company she’s not entirely sure his buttons would last very long against the temptation to straight rip his shirt open and pick up where they left off the moment Thomas blithely walked up. They’re treading a dangerous line carrying on like this with him just outside, but she didn’t start it this time and isn’t going to play his part of stopping them. So what?” she repeats just to twist the knife.

Daud bows his face back into her, confessing to the hollow under her ear. “-turned on,”

When Emily pulls Daud this time the rest follows, warm weight coming to press against her, more focused on the press of him against her than anything they manage to whisper to each other under the covering rustle of the wind through the trees. “You too?”

Daud’s breath seems to flow into as much as over Emily, but when she turns to try and catch his mouth with hers he evades it, laying cheek to cheek instead. She’s frustrated enough to retaliate by darting forward to catch his earlobe in her teeth.

“Don’t,” Daud says with a carefully restrained but still rather animal rasp to his tone, then pushes off her.

“You started it.” Emily knows the meaning of these words between them. Words that unleashed this storm, which shows little signs of stopping.

“I know.” Daud seems caught half way between guilty and frustrated, dropping his head and taking a deep breath that tickles Emily’s skin on the exhale. “It was hard enough just sparring.”

“Is that why you made so many mistakes?” Emily raises a hand in the meagre – not much, but present – space between them to set her fingers under Daud’s chin. She pushes gently to tilt his
face square at hers, scratching her nails gently across his stubble. “I thought distraction was everywhere?”

“It is.” Daud’s eyelids lower, then the sound of footsteps repels them like magnets. Thankfully, Thomas doesn’t show inside, only ventures past the window. Presumably, and if they’re lucky, he’s on his way to the water pump. “We can’t keep on like this,” he warns when Thomas is finally out of sight and earshot.

“Then what do you propose?” Emily’s hand resets her grip on Daud’s jaw, but this time for the thing she’s wanted to do to him a solid handful of times since Thomas arrived. Make him **look** at her. There was a time when those looks were the only tender thing between them, and an irrational, spoiled impulse in Emily resents anything that stops Daud giving them.

The trouble is, now Emily knows what they foretell, and for all their scrapping and dancing around, last night was just a small bite out of an appetite that is truly vast. If Daud hadn’t been so fussy in the morning, that hunger might be more slaked, and Emily’s tone less bitter. “Will you continue to rile me up without gratification?”

“**Me?**” Daud jerks himself out of her grip like he can’t believe the audacity of her claim. “Look to yourself before you cast accusations.”

“What?” Emily returns in only partially-acted outrage. “We were **sparring**, what fault of mine is it if that stirs you?”

There is a twist in Daud’s expression as she dares to say it, but it’s not uncomfortable – more like vindictive. “Because you simply had to twist me up like a rope to be knotted at every opportunity.”

Admittedly, Emily **had** tended towards dropping her weapon and putting Daud into binds about as often as he’d let her, which was probably more than he’d permit anyone else.

“I’d think you ought to be pleased with my improvement.” Her haughty tone treads a tightly pulled line over argument and flirtation. “You’re the one always going on about my overreliance on weapons.”

“Not as an excuse to… grab at me,” Daud contradicts, and isn’t exactly wrong. There’s a prickle in his look that’s more than hazy lust, something that tells Emily she’s really getting to him. “Go wind a watch if you must twist something ‘til it springs.”

Although Emily can’t quite gauge how serious he is, she upholds her blend of theatre and sincerity, jabbing a finger accusingly in the centre of his chest. “I haven’t even **started** with you yet, Daud,” she throws down, focusing on him with a gaze so tense if she looked away a moment later she’s sure Thomas would return to find them furiously necking at the very least. “Though you’re rather convincing me to try.”

What Emily **doesn’t** expect is for Daud to move at his top speed to deliver hands lightning fast to her body with the precision of a master assassin; a clever curve of fingers pressing between her legs through her clothing. The sudden pressure elicits a traitorous whimpering noise from behind Emily’s clenched teeth.

“Famous last words.” A moment of gratification passes so quick Emily can barely exist in it before the contact vanishes. Daud backs away again lest he be discovered in the difficult-to-explain position of having his hand in the Empress’s crotch.

Emily chews over a mouthful of desire that’s still found no outlet with Daud’s continued avoidance
of kissing her. She manages to give him a scathing up and down before he turns away to walk further kitchen, and is of the opinion that he’s clearly not unaffected himself.

“Challenge accepted,” she tells him. One final shot steeped in tension, then a change in tone entirely, picking up with only a little strain. “I’ll go see if Thomas requires any help with the water.”

“What?” Daud’s bemused query arrives on her heels as she strolls away.

Emily finds Daud’s onetime lieutenant stooped over the water pump splashing his face and neck with water in a way she recognises all too well. She also approaches with such softened footsteps – so unlike an Empress – that he bristles a little when she speaks.

“It can be rather overwhelming, can’t it?”

“Uh, your majesty?” Thomas is awkwardly posed, hunched over to splash his face under the stream of water with a terrible flush to his cheeks.

“The heat.” Emily supplies. Thomas seems a little relieved, strangely enough. “Take care not to fall prey to sunstroke, I can assure you it’s an utterly joyless experience.”

“I… thanks,” Thomas garbles his words, falling mute to watch as Emily strides up beside him. She lifts one of the many buckets that move between here and the house to hang by the handle over the pump, and Thomas he steps back obligingly and starts to work the handle.

“You do get used to it, somewhat.” Emily says as water starts to gurgle into the bucket, watching it fill with an indifferent expression. “Though I must admit my coping methods have at times lacked subtlety.”

This is exactly all of the warning and explanation she gives before unhooking the bucket from the spout of the pump and lifting it directly above her head, tipping the entire contents over herself head-first with a shudder at the shock of the cold, pure water that she knows she’s going to miss when she can’t call it out of the ground with such ease.

“Shall we?” Emily looks at Thomas with a polite smile, acting as if all is perfectly normal and leading with a hand for the house.

“… After you?” Thomas replies like he’s absolutely no idea what madness he just witnessed, seeming very committed to the act of not looking at her before she leads the way.

This is a fine opening for the reaction Emily hopes to get from Daud. A bet that is paid in full when she watches the expression of composure drop clean off his face when he steps outside – getting ready to go out and tend the grounds, going by the hat and basket – and catches sight of her dripping against one of the pillars of the terrace.

“What happened to you?” he says with a firmly pulled into-tune tone hum to his voice. Emily hopes it’s a cover for not expecting her first move to be this.

“Accident at the pump,” she replies without guile, glancing over Thomas’s curious observation of her playful lie.

“Of course,” Daud mutters like he doesn’t believe a word of it – which he’s naturally right to – and
turns his gaze to Thomas with false indifference. “I’ve a few things to do about the place before continuing her highness’s training, so grab a basket from inside and come with me while she…” he pauses, casting her up and down with a look she knows with great intimacy, though they’ll have to hope Thomas hasn’t deciphered its implications just yet, “dries.”

“Very well.” There have been no further yes Daud’s since Thomas’s first few slips, and he ambles into the kitchen with a forebodingly quiet gait.

In the slim time that Thomas is gone, Daud blinks from where he stands to almost on top of where Emily does, profile fitting into hers as he squares his mouth over her ear.

“Cheap,” he growls, a hand coming to rest greedily over the sodden fabric of her shirt.

“But effective,” she counters as his fingers close into a firm squeeze. He finds and exacerbates the hardness of a nipple, and Emily’s next noise doesn’t even shape into words. By the time she’s whipped around to try and face Daud, he’s back where he was, pretending it never happened as Thomas returns. Emily crosses her arms, hoping it’ll conceal some details she’d rather keep private in spite of an excessively clingy shirt.

She doesn’t get another good look at Daud and Thomas before they set out into the grounds. It’s a rite of passage it’d taken Emily almost a week to reach, she notes a little jealously, even if she and Daud did start far better strangers. She can’t forget that Thomas is someone who once held a position of authority under Daud’s command, more used to working together.

She wonders what conversation Thomas might pry from Daud as they go, a concern only soothed by the notion that it took damn-near three weeks to get the info she has from him. Thomas has hours at the most. Even if he does already know much about Daud’s old life that Emily doesn’t, she cringes to remind herself. Perhaps never would, at least not from his own mouth.

Retrieving the musical instrument from the kitchen, Emily drips through the hammock and takes a moment to bask in her surroundings. She strums silly melodies she can hardly remember to a pleasant rustle of wind through the vines of the trellis and far-off chitter of birds; a fine soundtrack to the tunes she recalls or composes with small movements of her fingers over the easy-to-slip strings.

Having carefully recalled and practiced the required motions, when Daud and Thomas come back to the house a while later, Emily fades seamlessly out of one song and into another. Daud is paying no notice to her, at first, then as he crosses the terrace she plays the opening notes of the tune he taught her this morning.

Daud stills as Emily plucks the revolving tune from the strings. His back might even stiffen, and she wonders if he’s remembering her ‘lesson’ as well as she is. When he looks at her, Emily reverts her gaze indifferently at the intricate tangle of vines over her head, a few blossoms still dangling from the roof. She’s wearing a perfectly innocent expression, or so she thinks. Because the next thing she knows the instrument has been ripped from her hands, flying straight across the terrace with a whip of the void to pelt into Daud’s open hand.

“No more music,” he says with a toneless, statuesque face. Emily returns it with an equally blank canvas, no open smile on the lips for the benefit of their company. Thomas doesn’t seem as surprised as he might – grouchy behaviour from Daud is probably more in line with his expectations. Emily holds this gaze for a long moment that’s only interrupted when Daud looks down to the patio.

“How fares the work?” she inquires with carefully dressed etiquette.
“More assistance than you’ve been.” He’s blunt but in a way she pays no mind to, knowing well enough to read the familiarity underneath.

“Well then, how may I be of help?” she offers without actually stirring herself from the hammock. “Are you hungry?” *For what,* she leaves open.

“… I could eat,” Daud rumbles, eyes passing over her full of ambiguity. “Thomas.” Daud directs his attention away from Emily with a noticeable shift in tone, “rest and get something to drink, you won’t help me by passing out half-way up a tree from sunstroke.”

*And he talks of being cheap,* Emily scathes as Daud doesn’t hesitate to not-so-subtly remind her of ways she’s made a fool of herself around him.

“Not my intention,” Thomas replies rather wearily, but still slopes off in the direction of the pump.

“Since the Empress is so kindly offering.” Daud watches Emily laboriously get out of the hammock, and then the back of Thomas passing out of sight around the corner of the house. After that, his eyes meet hers without a need to hold back the grin painted with a flash of teeth across his face. “You better come with me,” he finishes in a way that devolves almost to a purr. With nerves sharpened to a point over the taste of foreboding on her tongue, Emily follows him inside.

“The tomatoes will need to be boiled,” Daud delivers to Emily’s sceptically knotted eyebrows as she enters the kitchen behind him and does not find herself put against any hard surfaces within steps of the door. Much to her disappointment.

“Oh,” she remarks, watching Daud rummage in the basket slung down from his shoulder and set out various vegetables on the kitchen table.

“Oh?” he echoes with an amused hint to his expression as he tilts his head to catch her eye.

“You actually want me to cook,” she supplies.

“Oh,” he hums, straightening up and not faltering as Thomas inches out of view from the window in the distance. “And what did you think I wanted?”

Alone again, she doesn’t bother with the mild disorientation of blinking and simply walks up to him at the table, arriving at his side to survey the ingredients he’s laying out for her.

In a bold move that is almost entirely borne from Daud’s earlier candidacy in running hands over her body like he’s measuring her for new clothing, she dares to draw a palm over his front. They’re facing forward over the table, such that even from outside it might not appear obvious what she’s doing, but it feels dangerous all the same.

“I shouldn’t imagine it’s too hard for you to work out,” she replies, a subtle emphasis on the critical word as her palm brushes his crotch. A moment of contact later she shifts on and lifts a ripe tomato, turning it quizzically in her hand as she opens to face him side-on. “Boil them, you say?”

“Hm,” he almost sighs, eyes hanging a little low. “Quarter first, then cook down with some water to soften, the rest should be chopped and cooked in the oven. Use this.” He turns away and unlids a clay dish on the counter. “Tomatoes and the liquid in first, then the potatoes and rest, onions and garlic on top.”
“Seasoning?” she humours.

“Salt and pepper here,” he gestures to unmarked containers that need no further identification than where they are in his world. “Dress it well with oil and this,” he says handling a fistful of freshly harvested herb, the curly leaves of which she pinches between her fingers and then sniffs. It’s familiar without being recognisable.

“What do you call it?” she asks.

“Something you wouldn’t know,” he replies, and she narrows her eyes at him a little for being tricky. “Cook it for an hour or so with the lid cracked, I’ll be by to check on it.”

“Have I failed you before?” she puts to him.

“Not yet,” he answers soft all of a sudden, a shine of something deeper in his face when he looks at her. He’s failed her, he might say if they were in different circumstances. After a glance out the window he adds, “Think you can handle that?”

Daud doesn’t object to the step Emily takes towards him, or the arm she slips around his neck, so Thomas must not be near. She thinks this without bothering to check herself, intent only on plying Daud into the right shape as she presses against him, turning her face the short way up to his that is such hotly securitised territory.

“Yes Daud,” she answers, then winds in the rest of the way to finally press her smiling mouth to his.

Chapter End Notes

I'm aware that the sexual tension is at peak sadist level, and I don't know what to tell you. I'm just that much trash.

Finishing on a kiss-then-cut is an old cliche, but definitely a goodie ;)

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The Fifty-Fifth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Conclusions are drawn, though not quite as planned.

Chapter Notes

I've been busy for the first time in a long time, apparently, as I've been short on time to edit this before posting. I might go back and tweak some stuff but by this stage I feel I can occasionally duck out on what's been a pretty intense editing process.

For now, enjoy UST: the Saga Continues.

As Emily sets to work on the dish Daud instructed her to prepare for lunch, his absence throws into sharp contrast just how much they’d been touching all morning. It sparks something Emily has little alternative but to accept as missing – physically, at least, if not more.

For as free as she’s been about getting into… this, whatever it is, Emily hasn’t thought about how far it was supposed to go – surely not to where she merely thinks about Dauds hands on her and actually feels something, even when he’s not here.

Nothing about this situation squares up to reasonable logic; timing, place and person are all wrong by any sensible stretches of the word. Yet between Emily, Daud and this place somehow created the conditions in which this even happened. Now that it has – numerous times, with little sign of abating – there’s nothing to be done about it. Or so Emily reasons, as she follows the steps of the recipe Daud recited to her – another test of sorts.

This is hardly the time for second thoughts, she lectures herself. Changing her mind about what’s passed between her and Daud wouldn’t affect anything that’s already happened. She doubts it’d even influence her behaviour now; not in the thrall of his presence, where Emily’s sensibilities go so quickly out the window.

For all Daud’s talk about what Emily has been doing to him, there’s been none on what he’s doing to her. An effect that’s crept in unsolicited and fills Emily with a strange trepidation as she goes about the almost-familiar chores of preparing the meal, both anticipating Daud’s return and fearing what it’ll bring.

In spite of her fixation on Daud’s return, he manages to catch her completely by surprise, traversing across the terrace and kitchen both to appear directly behind her without his footsteps even sounding outside. His thumbs and forefingers pinch teasingly at the softest part of her waist, almost jumping her out of her skin as he catches her completely out of her zone.

“Gotcha.” Emily starts to whip around, a hand instinctively grabbing for the knives, but Daud’s settles down on top of hers. It stops Emily short, keeping her tethered to the counter with Daud’s
body shadowing hers. The fingers of his other hand arrive on her hip, leading into a palm and soon arm wrapped around her front. Emily’s head promptly surrenders to the reasoning of her body, and she melts into him for a terrible, wonderful moment.

“Where is he?” she asks, because there’s no way Daud would be like this with her if Thomas were within breathing distance.

“Cooling off,” he answers lowly, a forearm warm across her stomach, then in a more teasing, perhaps even possessive murmur. “Did I frighten you?”

“Of course not,” Emily sort of sounds stern, but is undermined by the way her body fits against Daud’s. “You just caught me by surprise.”

“Not feeling threatened is no reason to let your guard down,” he lectures.

“And to think I actually missed you,” she says carelessly, realising only after speaking what it is she actually said. Daud manages to go even more still against her, wrapped around her in an embrace so comfortable it asks for nothing except to be left as is.

“Don’t tell me that,” he says stiffly, warnings that need pushing along rusty tracks. Daud might take off around the grounds for an hour or so, but for Emily to use those words and even mean them is a cruel joke, because she’s the one supposed to be leaving. For good.

“Sorry,” Emily replies in a way that’s too soft to bear talking about, moving Daud’s hand resting on top of her own to wind his other arm around her. Landing herself in an embrace so close Emily can feel the rise and fall of Daud’s chest against her back. She’s certain that none of her convoluted chains of rationale said anything about this thing between them feeling like something she could miss. In a way more meaningful and frightening than noticing Daud’s absence over a few scattered hours while he’s working the grounds.

“How’s lunch?” Daud rasps into her, desperate relief off a wound they’re both trying to deny.

“You tell me.” Emily begrudges as much as is relieved by the extraction of Daud from around her, moving away to open the stove. “I followed your instructions to a letter so any faults with it are yours as much as mine.” Daud reaches into the oven with a cloth thrown over his hand and withdraws with the lid. He sets it on the counter, exchanged for wooden tongs with which he tosses the vegetables. When Daud rights himself, he’s trailing a fingertip over the oiled end of the utensil, which he brings to his mouth and licks.

“It’s fine,” he replies guilelessly.

“Let me try.” Rather than run through the routine with her own hand, Emily merely uses it to guide Daud back through the motions. Holding his compliant wrist loosely in hers, Emily brings his finger to her mouth after swiping another taste of the food off the tongs, then lifts the taste off his fingertip, eyes not leaving hers for a moment.

“I suppose you think you’re being clever,” he mutters heavily.

“I can assure you cleverness doesn’t enter into it,” Emily replies as his finger drags at her lower lip. Daud was the one who’d called this unwise in the first place, not that it made a damn bit of difference now. “What are we going to do about him?” Emily gives a demonstrative flick of her eyes to the window.

“What do you have in mind?” Daud returns, and Emily considers what’s truly of importance here, outside of the magnetism that even now wants to draw her back in.
“One of us should talk to him,” she suggests. “To find out what he… knows.”

“He hasn’t worked for me for a long time,” Daud muses. “It’s better if you do it.”

“You’d rather not, you mean?” she surmises with a narrow look.

“If it were me,” Daud says with a calculating expression, “I’d tell him to mind his own damn business and get back to work.”

“It’s the nature of such work that worries me most,” Emily sighs. “I wish I knew my father’s true orders to him.”

“Hm,” Daud murmurs, probably extrapolating a world of implications about where her power ends and Corvo’s begins; as much as she dreads to admit it, Corvo has retained a far more active role in the state than she’s grown into.

While she’s been in-absentia for nearly a month, there’s no way Corvo could have been gone as indefinably long as she has without far greater trouble. Yet looking around this place, Emily doesn’t feel that bad about it. Corvo grew up around these hills, not in the middle of an Empire that’s looked to her as a point of unity since she was a child, so she can afford to enjoy being here without feeling horribly guilty all of the time.

“Fine,” Emily concedes on further reflection, with a relatively mild roll of her eyes. “I’ll do it.”

Their lunch is flavoured with an over-awareness of one other. Thomas eventually appears on the terrace, one layer down but still clad in a far thicker and darker shirt than she or Daud would ever by caught in.

“You always eat like this?” Thomas asks as they sit down to the table Emily and Daud laid without even needing to talk about it.

“Not always,” she answers, stepping in to speak just before Daud does, who she suspects might have been readying a ‘mind your own business’ as they set into the meal.

“Pretty good, nonetheless,” Thomas compliments, and while Emily is proud she imagines he’s noticed the difference in taste here compared to Dunwall, rather than her own ability.

“Isn’t it?” She refrains from anything as bold as pointing out that she’ll miss the cooking – and cook – when her inevitable departure takes place. It strikes Emily like the sudden application of a stranglehold that what Thomas’s presence truly means is she and Daud won’t be alone again, properly alone. As soon as the thought occurs, Emily finds it completely unacceptable.

“Are you all right, Empress?” Thomas asks, noticing perhaps how intensely she’s staring at the space just above his shoulder.

“Yes,” she bluffs. “Just thinking about… the end of my training.” Or more accurately, how to keep on preserving the appearance of such while he's still around. Better yet, she considers how to get Thomas to leave – what circumstances it'd take to go against Corvo's orders to escort her all the way back.

“Oh?” Thomas seems to be in reasonably good humour, all things considered. “Well how much of the programme have you gone through?”
“Nearly all of it, I should hope,” Emily says a little indignantly, and Daud gives a pleasantly gritty laugh. “Have I?” she puts to him far more seriously than Thomas probably realises, meeting his eyes over the dish of roasted vegetables.

“The important parts,” Daud answers ambivalently, casting his eyes across the table between them. “Test her if you like.” There's something about the way he says it that feels indescribably possessive, like he's confident Emily will hold up to questioning. However, Thomas doesn't seem terribly keen on putting her to any such trial.

“Tell me, did you use all the same rotten tricks on others too?” Emily cuts into the tension like a dense cake.

“Tricks?” Thomas is the owner of this sceptical inquiry.

“Oh you know, obscure riddles with potatoes and playing cards?” Emily names carelessly, only for Thomas’s face to transform even further into incredulity.

“What?”

“That one was different for you,” Daud speaks knowingly, and all eyes around the table draw towards him. His own focuses on a slim mark on the back of Thomas's hand. “When I gave you that scar.”

“Then I take it the Empress's injury isn't due to your stabbing her through the hand?” Thomas phrases rather sardonically all things considered.

“He most certainly hasn’t,” Emily shoots with an accusatory look at a man who appears remarkably guiltless as he cuts a thick slice from the bread. “What did you do to him?”

“He stole from me.” Daud shrugs in a manner that makes Emily believe he'd done it without a shadow of a doubt. “I simply explained how no one under my command gets a coin that isn't earned.”

“You put what I’d taken under my hand and said I could keep the money if you could take it without touching me,” Thomas finishes, finding Daud’s own account unsatisfactory. “Then ruined a good cheque for a thousand coin, as I remember.” Unfortunately, Emily can imagine exactly how the puzzle she'd failed to solve would translate into such circumstances, and imagines the quickness of Daud’s blade as he drove it straight through a wet potato doing the same to Thomas’s flesh.

“It proved my point,” Daud says uninterestedly.

“Don’t get between a master assassin and his fee?” Emily swears she can see the cogs grinding to a halt in Daud’s head as she addresses him with the suggestion.

“Don’t cross me,” he almost growls; an assassin doesn’t let anything stand between them and their target, Emily recalls well enough. If Thomas only knew he was the potato in this equation, she thinks as Daud’s eyes settle on her like he’s fully resolved on what he wants, then shift coldly onto his once-lieutenant. “Thomas needed a little persuasion to work with me at first.”

“That’s one way to put it,” he retorts, fingerling the scar overrun with memory.

“It’d seem you've a talent for that,” Emily says to Daud.

“Please,” Daud delivers this like it's supposed to have no effect on Emily, as if he's not setting the
coals one by one into her gut with his own gifted hands, “that’s your area of expertise, Empress.”

After all Emily’s lured Daud into, it’d follow that persuasion is her game – but then she never would’ve set upon this madness if Daud hadn’t as good as invited it. He could have helped himself and her both by not falling so desperately for her in the first place.

Their eyes catch like they’ve been threaded on the same string like pearls across the table, and this ‘talk’ Emily needs to have with Thomas seems ever-more necessary. The affixing of her title to the things coming from Daud’s mouth is a rather poor covering of formality over what’s as good as flirting.

Mastering willpower enough to desist from such risky exchanges makes for a rather quiet lunch thereafter. Though it’s still easy enough to fall into the tranquillity of the place, soft sighs over such a beautiful view as the sun bakes the valley.

“It’s a nice place you’ve found out here,” Thomas shatters the peace, fumbling with an almost emptied pack of cigarettes as he finds himself on the sharp end of a matching set of accusatory looks for breaking a comfortable silence.

“Moreso than when I first found it,” Daud replies with great reservation, reaching out for one of the conciliatory cigarettes offered to him.

“Then you’ve been here a while.” Thomas doesn’t phrase it like a question, but Emily still reckons she could use a piece of chalk to trace the outlines of Daud’s boundaries about how far he’s willing to answer. There’s a peculiar delight in knowing more about this part of his life than Thomas does.

“Feels like no time at all.” Daud settles as Emily closes the imaginary circle around him, lighting the cigarette off a match Thomas offers him before they lapse back into a less comfortable silence than before.

The meal is almost finished before anyone speaks again.

“I’ll put on some coffee,” Daud says, rising as he stubs the cigarette Thomas gave him on a pillar of the trellis. Cheap luxuries he can’t get anymore, Emily considers over Daud’s pleasure as he drags through the cheap, Dunwall-stinking tobacco.

Emily motions to get up with Daud from across the table, but he stops her short. “Stay,” he issues simply, compelling her to remain seated as he leaves – effectively abandoning her with Thomas and the mammoth in the room.

“So…” Thomas leads – a bad sign at best, “you two have reached something of an… understanding.” There’s better and worse things he could’ve said, but for whatever reason, Emily responds in the most dramatic way possible.

“I could have killed him,” she says calmly, overlooking the shock and disbelief in Thomas’s face as she continues, “would that have been better?”

“What?” Thomas’s expression clouds over.

“He certainly encouraged me to try,” Emily says, and then more thoughtfully. “I’m still not quite convinced he wouldn’t have preferred if I did.”
For reasons she can only guess at, her stabs in the dark only slightly more accurate following the time they’ve spent together, Thomas just says, “You couldn’t kill him.”

“No,” Emily agrees, though perhaps for reasons different to what he suspects. “I couldn’t.” Or wouldn’t, at least.

“Then why’d he ask you to?”

“It was one of my lessons,” she answers. “As to why he expressed it that way, you’d have to counsel him.” There’s little disturbance, just the quiet sounds from inside of Daud conspicuously not being around, and Emily begrudgingly accepts she might need to be a little more forward in addressing this situation. “I realise,” she begins, “that it might look a little… strange.”

“What does?”

“The way Daud and I are… getting along,” she phrases delicately. “I assure you no one appreciates the unconventionality of this arrangement better than I do.” She pauses for a moment. “It was Corvo’s idea in the first place, in case he neglected to mention that.”

“He did,” Thomas remarks warily. Did neglect it, or did say, she can’t quite be sure, but it doesn’t really matter either way. Thomas knows now.

“Coming to train under my mother’s assassin is the last thing I wanted to do,” Emily tries to emphasise, “but even I saw the sense in it eventually.”

“Sense?” Thomas echoes like he doesn’t know the meaning of the word.

“Corvo couldn’t keep my mother safe from the best assassin money could buy.” Emily meets Thomas’s eyes straight for once, staring directly at him across the table. “Nothing can change the past, only what is yet to come, so what else was I to do?” Thomas doesn’t say anything, just watches Emily until she finds herself answering her own question. “Daud’s training has been… an invaluable asset to my continued reign.”

“I understand, Empress,” Thomas asserts formally, but she still doesn’t feel enough has been said.

“And you spoke yourself about the way Daud has of… bringing things out in people.” Emily stumbles into sincerity as she realises a stiff talking to isn’t going to get her anywhere. “How he’ll push someone past what they thought possible, but also how rewarding it can be.” Emily hopes this is going to go somewhere, because otherwise she’s getting worryingly close to spilling some uncomfortable truths for nothing, and decides to retreat before she goes guts and all else across the table. “Though I won’t deny he can also be rather taxing.”

Thomas gives her a searching look, but it doesn’t concern her in the same way as some of the ones before. It’s warmed with something subtle – the camaraderie of shared burden, perhaps. “Yes,” Thomas says carefully. “He can be like that.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” Emily sighs, relaxing a sliver more and managing a thin smile as she leans forward on her arms against the stable. “He’s about as difficult to deal with as it is to resent him for it, somehow.”

“If even you can’t stay angry at him, Your Majesty, then I don’t know that anyone can,” Thomas notes like settling leaves on the ground, an air of someone who understands how hard it is to stay set against the man who once put a knife through his hand just to prove a point.

“I know my father wants you to escort me back to Dunwall without delay,” Emily lays out in the
open, following her gut as it whispers something that almost sounds like Daud’s words about Thomas being trustworthy, “but I… need a little more time here.” For the first time, Emily is appealing to Thomas not as an Empress to a subject, but someone who knows and has worked with Daud. “You can understand that, can’t you?”

This, she remembers, is someone who Daud once trusted enough to be his second in command, even filling the hole left by a hard betrayal. The traits that may have propelled Thomas to such a role become evident in the softening of his features, followed by a simple question.

“How long do you need?”

But even as he says it, Emily realises that there’s no amount of time that will be good enough if he’s still here, and that she actually has an entirely different problem to deal with.

“You have to go,” she practically blurts, managing to finish, “to Karnaca,” before it becomes too conspicuous. “To… send a letter to Corvo for me,” she fills in as she goes. “I know it might not be entirely in line with his instructions, but I’ll follow on and meet you at the ship – I assume there’s one waiting?”

“The Maiden of Morley, your highness,” Thomas says, and Emily hoists her eyebrows up her face incredulously.

“Very well,” she doesn’t quite deliver with a straight face. “I’ll just… fetch the letter.”

She gets up and strolls into the kitchen with an easy pace that drops the moment Thomas is out of direct sight, driving straight for Daud at the counter. Daud turns to meet her, but edges back when Emily doesn’t stop her charge into him, leading with her face invasively into his space as she gets close enough to whisper, “Where do you keep your writing materials?”

His eyes narrow a little but he answers quickly. “In the desk,” he answers quietly. “Why?”

“Thomas is leaving.” Emily registers the surprise in Daud’s face, but it’s not something she can bask in for now. “On which point, I’ve a short correspondence to pen.”

“Leaving?” is the only word Daud echoes, but with a volume of concern held between his steely eyes.

“Alone?”

“Alone?” Something else floods into Daud’s expression. “What happened to finding out what he knows?”

“I’m working on it,” Emily rushes, eyeing Daud’s mouth as words fly through her mind, trying to arrange some semblance of coherent sentence. His face turns towards scepticism at this new turn of developments, which she deters with a business-like, “I don’t have much time.”

“Then go.” He gestures with a jerk of his head toward the door. “I’ll keep him busy.”

Emily flies down the hallway and into Daud’s room, flooding sunlight through the open shutters as she races to the desk and pulls at drawers until she lands upon what she’s looking for. She takes up a sheet of carefully handmade paper and a fountain pen that could be older than she is, then slots in at the desk desk and starts writing.

Corvo,
I forward this message in advance of myself and Thomas – whose involvement in this matter I’d very much like to discuss with you when I am back in the city – to provide the full reassurance that I am in good health and will be soon returning to Dunwall.

While I appreciate the concern expressed for my wellbeing during my time away from the city, please assure any concerned parties that all is well. However, I will remaining here a little longer, and beg the court and parliament’s understanding in this matter.

I don’t imagine I need to request your understanding, being that this residency was embarked upon at your suggestion. I would instead like to extend my thanks for your urging me into this, as it has been a highly enlightening experience.

Emily

P.S. Try sardines to pacify a bad mood.

Emily folds the paper without sealing it and addresses the back simply to ‘The Lord Protector Corvo’ adding her signature underneath before she heads outside. There’s no wax to seal it with but she’s a disinclination to care about the hands this note will have to cross before it reaches Corvo’s – there’s nothing really incriminating to read anyway.

Daud is perched on the tabletop with his feet on the bench next to Thomas, elbows propped on his knees and a difficult-to-miss portion of his neck exposed as he looks over at his former employee, a new cigarette burning at the end of his fingers. Emily wonders exactly how many of his own cigarettes Thomas has even had since arriving, or how many Daud would get through if he had the access his self-imposed exile denies him. While Emily heard them talking as she approached, the conversation is all but concluded by the time she ever makes it through the door.

“Here you are,” she addresses to Thomas alone, as Daud is yet to turn around to look at her. Watching for his former’s reactions, Emily reasons as the brush of Daud’s denied acknowledgement rubs across her like the wrong direction on velvet; how even now he won’t give audience to an Empress when she requests. “Send this to Dunwall Tower from the post office in Karnaca, it’ll reach Corvo quickly enough.”

“That’s all?” Thomas queries as she passes across the flimsy folded over note.

“My signature should be enough to vouch for its authenticity,” Emily assures him like that’s what they’re talking about, and not whether he’s become a conduit for the passing notes between opposite ends of the Empire. “When will you leave?”

“Well I-”

“There’s a shorter way to the next village,” Daud comes in like a saw through fresh timbre, fresh from a drag on what must surely be one of Thomas’s last cigarettes. “Cuts down the hillside. It might be a little overgrown, but you’d easily make it by nightfall.” Daud still hasn’t looked at Emily yet, but as he adds the last part she wonders if that might not be just as intentional as if he had.

“That sounds… convenient,” Thomas answers overly consciously.

“It was mostly used when the house was still being rebuilt,” Daud continues as if he’s been a great giver of anecdotes before this moment. “I spent a lot of time going back and forth and wanted for a quicker route. It’s more or less a straight shot down the hillside, but I can mark your map as a precaution.”
“I’ll just get it,” Thomas replies, still seeming like he’s only got one foot in the development. But he rises nonetheless, still holding the slip of paper in his hand.

There’s a cautionary pause as Thomas leaves, before Daud turns his head around and hangs Emily up with a look that seems about as perturbed as anything else. “Were you planning on keeping me abreast of your plans,” Daud takes another puff on his smoke that seems almost irate in its nature, “or am I supposed to guess at each turn?”

“What do you have to complain about?” she shoots back. “He’s leaving, isn’t that enough?”

“Hm.” Daud flicks ash and then sticks the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, sucking another drag out of it as he gets up from the table and spits smoke from the other corner, spewing a distinctive fog that reminds her of home in all kinds of contradictory ways. “A little forethought wouldn’t go amiss.”

“Don’t be insufferable,” Emily accuses. “I saw a chance when we were talking and took it.” The look Daud holds her in is no less stern, but Thomas returns before they say anything more.

“I presume this is the infamous map Corvo has been distributing of my whereabouts?” Daud accords, pulling out of the cloying unresolved tension of their conversation with an air like nothing could be the matter as he extends a hand for the paper.

“If it can be called that,” Thomas replies uncertainly, passing it over to be turned around in Daud’s hands and outright chuckled at.

“This is it?” Daud seems amused, and Thomas just nods. “Then I’m surprised either of you found me.” Daud orientates the map against one of his knees, while his cigarette cultivates ash hanging from the corner of his mouth.

“It was easy,” Thomas replies. “I just followed word of a curious woman from Gristol travelling this way.”

“Of course you did,” Daud purrs, finally removing the smoke from his mouth and eyeing Emily with a terrible streak of ‘I told you so’ in his eyes. Emily rolls her own, but does find herself thinking about the things she’d do differently if she were to make the trip again – knowing what she knows now. How she might better cover her own trail. “It’ll have to do.” Daud gets up and heads for the doorway inside, then with a glance that only touches on Thomas and misses Emily entirely concludes, “I’ll be back.”

“Yes Daud.”

Emily registers the renewal of this address coming from Thomas at once, wondering what the men had discussed when she was away – or what it could mean for not-so-burned bridges. “I better get to packing, I suppose,” Thomas adds to no one in particular, Daud gone indoors and Emily staring out over the hills in lieu of watching the space after Daud like a pining dog.

“Thomas,” Emily calls out before he goes anywhere. “You know I’m… grateful your cooperation in this matter.”

“It’s no more than my duty, your majesty,” Thomas replies primly.

“You can spare me the formality.” Emily says on impulse. “I know who your orders are from, and have no doubt Corvo would prefer my return rather than a piece of paper. I’m just…” Not ready to leave, to be done with Daud and all he has to offer her. “Indebted to your understanding.”
“It’s all right.” There’s no adornment of titles cluttering Thomas’s speech for once. “I’ve seen what you’ve been trying to hide, so there’s really no need for this secrecy.” Emily’s gut twists with the sudden fear of being found out, but Thomas isn’t freaking out, so she dares to tug on a thread.

“Regarding?” Emily is trying not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but needs to know just what Thomas thinks he knows that they don’t want him to know.

“What I saw this morning.” Thomas is rather calmer than Emily would have expected for this situation, but she keeps her poker face on point, teeth feeling like they’re fighting for the same space in the back of her mouth. “You don’t have to wear that thing over your hand anymore.”

“Ah,” Emily over-enunciates, now shoving her instincts in an entirely different direction as she struggles to conceal her relief. Slowly she brings her hand up and unfolds the wrapping of fabric that kept the mark concealed. “I had hoped you wouldn’t notice.”

“The boss trained me too well for that,” Thomas says in a completely new way, rich in familiarity and perhaps even respect.

“You know it’s not-”

“I know he doesn’t choose who it appears on,” Thomas interjects before Emily can finish the same thought. “But I do know what it means.”

“Which is?”

“He trusts you.” However, not even Thomas broaches what it could mean about her feelings for him in return.

He may not need to, Emily wonders; surely Thomas must have shared Daud’s a mark long ago, probably on the very same hand Daud put a knife through when they were newly met. Perhaps Thomas is the last person Emily needs to tell about the way Daud has of getting people on side, in spite of who he’s been and what he’s done to them.

“I’d like to believe so,” she says a little too wistfully, staring at where he’s gone before returning to find Thomas’s gaze fixed on her.

“It’s normal, you know,” Thomas says out of the blue, with a far more conciliatory tone than Emily’s accustomed to. She frowns a little, flexing on her back foot against the comment.

“What is?”

“Discovering you’re more fond of Daud than reason would dictate,” Thomas answers knowingly.

“Hm,” Emily mimics too late to stop herself. “Would that he and everything else were much simpler,” she desairs as much as anything.

“I saw it happen all the time,” Thomas practically seems to console her. Saw what? Emily almost asks, but holds her tongue for thinking she can guess at well enough. “Though the boss never seemed to notice when someone liked him more than they should. Too wrapped up in...” Thomas loses the words right as they’re poised to appear.

“All those things that make him so unbearable?” she supplies.

“Indeed,” he affirms. “So don’t take it too personally,” Emily can sort of imagine what Thomas means – if she takes Daud’s behaviour minus all of the amorousness she’s drawn so agonisingly
out of him. “He’s just like that.”

It’s extremely hard for Emily to stop herself smiling with how utterly absurd the situation is. That Thomas’s observations could have lead him to this conclusion. “I’ll try to bear it in mind.”

“So when should I expect you in Karnaca?” Thomas doesn’t press it so hard this time, and for the first time Emily doesn’t feel like she’s dealing with her father behind a curtain. There’s only so long she could keep avoiding this question, which weighs on her more than she could have imagined when she finally drives herself to answer.

“Just a… few days, I suppose,” she sighs, wondering what reason any of this could give her stomach to tear itself in half like it does. “You better go,” she adds downheartedly. “I’ve kept you long enough.”

“Yes, Empress,” Thomas answers, though it ends up sounding more like ‘I’m sorry’ than anything else.

Chapter End Notes

So at least one commenter got pretty close to the 'Thomas doesn't think Daud and Emily are doing it because Daud *doesn't* do that' component of this chapter, but I know a good few of you were expecting Thomas to "find out" well... he sorta? Finds out? Some stuff???

Hopefully it's clear, but Thomas has basically diagnosed the situation as Emily's gotten Daud's mark, which means he trusts her and that's a Big Deal, but is also (based on past experience) used to people who suddenly gain Daud's trust/mark (and uncomfortably erotic undertones it brings) ending up a bit doe-eyed and crushing on 'the boss', which is utterly unacknowledged much less reciprocated by said boss. Mostly I love the idea of it being normal for new recruits who move up to being proper Whalers to fall for Daud a little bit, and for Daud to be so utterly oblivious to it and dismissive of romantic nonsense under his roof that 'sex doesn't interest him' was the group conclusion on the matter (and thus, the excerpt in DH2!). Little do they know....

As mad as it sounds we're actually starting to get towards the end of this story. I know. I really ought to finish it (I'm close, but if the once a week update falters it'll be on the last 1-2 chapters).

Hope everyone has a good weekend and thanks for reading ;3
The Fifty-Sixth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Spice.

Chapter Notes

This kind of spice is what happens when you keep building the sexual tension of characters who can't get enough of each other and have a wicked amount of time on your hands.

This is the official SPICE warning, now enjoy y'all selves.

I kind of blanked on editing this and played a LOT of Don't Starve instead, but figured with what's going on the finer touches might survive being left off at least until I read this again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Walk up the way you came in, but don’t take the road when you see it,” Daud explains, hand propped on one hip just past the front of the house, shaded from the sweltering sun under a hat the rest of their party much envy. “Keep right on over the hill then down the other side, it might be a little overgrown but there are steps cut into the steeper parts.”

“Steep?” Thomas echoes warily, like he’s been burned before.

“If me and a sixty-something stonemason could make it twice a day, you’ll manage by sunset,” Daud assures him, and then the moment falls terribly quiet, like he might still not leave.

“You have my correspondence for Corvo?” Emily offers in, a gentle nudge she administers with her arms crossed tightly over her chest as she resists the urge to flap the chest of her shirt for ventilation.

“I do,” he answers without cluttersome titles. “Well then… goodbye.”

“For now,” she suffixes. “I’ll see you on the Maiden.” Daud, of course, is silent.

“Of course,” Thomas confirms, but it’s not her he’s looking at. He stops and feels at his pockets, withdrawing a crumpled paper pack of cigarettes, which he tosses at Daud. He catches it and Daud’s eyes raise from hand to face, bearing a terribly serious look that’s not quite the emotionless mask Emily is accustomed to seeing when he wants to be unreadable.

“Goodbye, Thomas,” he issues finally, and even she knows it’s hardly enough between them but daren’t say anything.

“Bye,” Thomas returns with a nod of his head that Daud echoes, sparing a mere glance for Emily before he turns around and sets away from the house.
Emily watches for a moment, then turns on her heels and goes abruptly in the opposite direction.

“Emily,” she hears after her, and though it puts a twisted grin on her face she doesn’t stop or even look around, making it all the way past the doorway to the kitchen. Suddenly Daud is on the outside right behind her, catching up the space between them with blinking. “Emily,” he repeats lower, and this time she stops.

“Yes?” she replies politely.

“You don’t have anything to say about that?” he remarks with a tilt of his head uphill, where even now Thomas scuffs the dusty earth with his boots.

“What is there to say?” she contests. “I wanted to get rid of him, so I did. Do you have a problem with that?” She’s not bucking for a fight and he’s not riding for one either, going by the unbothered composure of his face. More urgent matters to press on.

“And why would you want a thing like that?” he phrases, sounding like he’s slowly sinking into a peat bog.

You know why, she thinks without it needing to be said, because they only look at each other a moment longer before he moves inside the door, reaching for her as she opens for him and in an instant they’re against the cool inside wall, fastened at the mouth.

“See,” she mumbles against him, an arm around his neck and his hands not stopping as they follow the shape of her torso up to the buttons of her shirt. “Hardly complaining now.”

“I wasn’t complaining,” he replies without an inch of room for doubt, hands coming together as he pushes buttons from their loops on her shirt; there’s plenty of them, so he’s got his work cut out plying them all apart one by one.

Emily puts her head back against the wall and snatches breaths as Daud's stubble scrapes from her neck to collarbone, a leg coming between hers that it doesn’t take long for her to be pushing against so her feet hardly need to touch the floor. Neither of them had explicitly said, or even implied, just why it was so important for Thomas to be sent away, but that he’s barely minutes from the house before they’re grinding against a wall is telling enough.

“I can barely control myself around you,” Daud groans as the final buttons of her shirt come loose, and he fills a hand in want of a breast. Give or take a few feet, it’s just about exactly where they left off right up until Thomas walked up, resumed a day later – the standard for how long they can keep it together with someone else around.

“Me either,” she answers, heaving around his touch and almost hanging from the arm she keeps looped around his neck, fingers digging into the meat of his shoulder.

This turns into sounds of a rather less verbal nature as he adjusts his leg between her thighs and she grinds instinctively, shirt bunching around her shoulders as she flexes and shifts higher up the wall, one of his arms slipping all the way around her to feel bare skin as he slips it under the back of her half-worn clothing.

“Is this what you were so keen on making me wait for?” she poses as she rocks against him.

What she gets is his hands sinking fast to the waistband of her trousers, manhandling the fastening open before he issues a throaty instruction that amounts to, “Off.”

She’s not hesitant to follow orders, dropping her hands and starting to slide them down her hips,
unlocked further when he moves his leg out of her crotch. Boots go with the clothing, dragged off into a pile that’s kicked aside as she presses back against the wall and is free to hook a leg around his waist. His other hand comes underneath her leg before long, getting sunk into kisses that have no definable boundaries while it runs up the underside of her thigh and then turns in to surely feel her.

“You’re so wet,” he observes in a way that to all intents and purposes also constitutes a moan.

“Isn’t that how you prefer me?” she returns, shuddering into a primal noise of her own as he trails fingertips around her. He makes arough hum with fine tuning of his fingers, letting her move against him and edging ever further up the wall, now with just one foot stretched perilously to the ground.

“So then,” he rasps in the hollow formed by their faces slotted together as she fidgets against his arm round her back. “What was this about fucking you against a wall?” His free hand drops to her front, twisting a nipple until she gasps and rocks harder into him.

“Is that not what we’re doing?” she poses, her own hands making hurried work of his buttons as she descends the front of his shirt.

“Give me a moment,” he plays, but she’s already made it down to his waistband, palming him through his trousers.

“Not sure you need one,” she retorts.

“Then keep going,” he urges when she stalls on his belt, which she resumes pulling undone.

One of his fingers slides into her just as she reaches for him, pushing deep enough she might be mistaken for thinking he wants her struggling to focus on what she’s doing. Especially when she finally tugs his waistband down, and he simply ups the distraction by adjusting his hand and sinking another finger in alongside the first while she squirms.

“Up you come.” Daud has a hand ready in the soft flesh of Emily's behind to hold her up as she lifts her other leg and wraps fully around his waist, braced against the wall as she takes grip around his shoulders and moves herself on his fingers with a sequence of whimperish noises. This is succeeded by a protestant one when he withdraws from her and – without rushing – raises his hand to his mouth and further wets two fingers already slick from exploits between her legs.

“You want it?” he issues with a taste of her on his lips, asking not because he’s any doubt but for the pleasure of hearing her answer.

“Yes Daud,” she appeases still posturing for his touch, squeezing the lock of her legs around his body as his hand lowers between them to rub over his end.

“Then see me in,” he says, finally setting his hand in reflection of the other to keep her in place as she takes a guiding hand to align them. “There?” he tests against the tense pressure she puts him to, and she just nods with vaguely affirmative sounds, waiting until he pushes enough to slip in with an uncontrollable moan on both their parts.

Daud’s chest presses against hers skin to skin as they close together, a firm grip on the back of his neck her anchor to him and whatever else is happening – not that she’s paying attention to anything beyond feeling of him on and in her once more. He vocalises something that isn’t words to her cheek, staying buried in her a moment before starting to move.

She hangs on, changing her purchase on him and soon getting frustrated with the interference of his
shirt – hers isn’t much better – so pulls it off one of his shoulders. Reading the intention, he shifts one arm at a time to allow her to slide the sleeves off and whips the thing aside as she circles her arms back around more pleasingly bare shoulders, hanging herself off him like something from a shelf as he holds her to the wall and fucks her.

Yes, this is exactly why she wanted to get rid of Thomas, whom they’ll just have to hope doesn’t come back for any reason. Catching them fucking against a wall within ten minutes of his leaving would be pretty hard to explain.

After all the back and forth, the payoff is just as she wanted, although gravity seems determined to intervene as she inches down the wall and fidgets to get hoisted back up, shirt rucking annoyingly around her shoulders in the process.

“I’m prepared to admit,” Emily remarks as he shifts her back up yet again, “that the bed would be more comfortable.”

“Tried telling you,” Daud answers not quite unbearably enough to merit retribution, pausing before pulling out and letting her down. “Go.”

They don’t waste time, heading straight through the house for his room with only the slightest pause – half-way down the corridor, when she sheds the wrinkled mess of her shirt and leaves it at the foot of the stairs. This is followed by the remainder of her clothing by the time she’s at the threshold of his room, amounting to a twisted brassiere that she discards on the floor she crosses to the bed.

Except after shadowing her most of the way, she ends up on one side of the room while Daud loiters in the middle, just looking at her; he’s quite the picture himself, stripped to and slightly below the waist, hanging out of his trousers.

“Daud?” she invites, and his eyes come to hers ripe with something other than the frenzied lust that carried them this far.

“I can’t think of one good reason for us to be doing this,” he remarks with unexpected clarity.

“Well,” she says, unsure how to respond at first. “Can you think of any bad ones?” His expression shifts to the licentious, and thumbs hook around his waistband before pushing it all the way to the floor, stepping out of his clothing and drawing closer to her.

“Too many,” he rasps, just within reach when he utters, “On your back.”

Emily would have never suspected herself of being so eager to please someone, much less him of all people, but she’s nothing but obliging as she settles back on the bed in accommodation of the space he soon takes up over her.

They’re both naked finally, so she clamours for the contact of his skin to hers, the pressure of contact releasing something deeply satisfying even before he holds himself in place to sink back into her. It’s wonderful for too many bad reasons, just as he said, but her only response is to hold on tighter.

He moves an arm underneath her, curling around her shoulders to pull against him as he moves in her; she’s reminded of the time at the lake, when he’d jumped on top of her and it’d been almost nothing like this – but only almost. There was still a spark, something that’d burned away until they’d been consumed by it like they are now.

Changing his weight as they settle on the far more accommodating mattress, he comes away from
her a little and hits a different angle, folding her up more with a rising sound of encouragement. He’s close enough to replace the sky over her, face in the curve of his neck and shoulder clouding the breaths that she draws off his skin with his warmth and smell; hot and heavy on top of her, she rides each swell as it comes, digging her nails into his back and reaping the rewards each time he shudders and shunts harder into her.

She feels his head turn, mouth coming to the side of her face and laying thoughtless kisses against it before she moves to meet him, lost to everything except the messy slip of lip and tongue as he keeps moving over and in her, knees splayed wide either side of him. It’s overwhelming just how good and primal it all feels, even and perhaps especially with Daud; something to get lost in, until no other thoughts can make it through.

Hearing the blunt noises of pleasure he makes – proving that yes, he can forget himself and just feel – encourages her to sound out her own, urging him on as he loses himself in her. Feeds herself straight back into the furnace he’s become, firing the both of them up like an over-fuelled engine and wringing all kinds of satisfaction out of her until he finally pauses for rest. His breath is cool over sweaty skin, which rolls off him more than her for once, beading down his forehead. Different kind of exertion to what he’s used to.

“I won’t last much longer,” he pants; just talking about the short-term in this case, which is a definite relief. “It’s too–”

“I’ve come to a decision,” she announces with rather a lot of gravitas, given their position. “I’m not going to tell you to stop holding back anymore.” He gives her a peculiar look, perhaps that she would talk about holding back while he’s literally inside her, but she doesn’t know him to be a foolish man, so expects him to understand when she adds, “You just have to let go, Daud, knowing I want you to.”

His response is a throaty noise that’s not quite a growl, followed by the arm behind her shifting to take a grip of the back of her head, hair still fastened and thankfully out of her way for once.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he murmurs, and then at such prompting sets off at a pace that makes her head spin, nails scraping across skin hard enough to draw something even more animal out of him.

A washy exchange of curses and barely human sounds passes between them as she lays mindlessly wrapped around him, rutting until he comes to a shuddering stop, pulling out of her already spilling hot over her inside leg. After last night he hardly needs to bother, but she suspects he only half-managed it this time.

For a moment nothing is said, a respite of quiet to respect the sanctity of what’s passed. Only a moment, though.

“And you questioned why I wanted Thomas to leave,” she comments, and though he makes no sound – all used up, perhaps – she feels him shake with silent mirth.

He shifts to the side of her that’s next to the wall, allowing her to shuffle over and grab around on the floor for the most recent item of clothing to be purposed as a mop-up cloth. It’s hers on this occasion, and she makes a note to take an actual cloth from the kitchen, given the likelihood of such requirements is only getting higher.

By the time she’s cleaned up he’s settled on his back, taking the bundled fabric she offers to him and lazily rubbing himself down as she slots to his side in an all-too-natural by now way, the fit of her cheek into the groove of his shoulder as perfect as if carved for that purpose alone.
“How long did you tell him you’d be?” he asks after a prolonged, though not uncomfortable pause, arm coming round the back of her to stroke light fingertips across her hip.

“A few days,” she answers, and the butterfly touch becomes a grip. Holding her while she’s still here, flesh and blood.

“You said that yesterday,” he points out.

“Only to you,” she retorts. “I said it to him today.”

“How about what he knows?” he probes next, gentle rise and fall of his chest under her face a reminder of what couldn’t be if he was dead – if she or Corvo or anyone else had succeeded in ending his life on the occasions they tried.

“Oh, he told me not to take it too personally,” she remarks with a grin wrapping surely around her lips.

“Take what?” he plays into the setup too perfectly.

“You,” she answers, adjusting her arm over his torso where clammy skin sticks together a little.

“Me?” he runs scathingly.

“You know, your insensibility to the feelings of those around you,” she teases, fingering the hair that trails from his stomach to groin. “All those niggling habits that drive people to madness.”

“Pack off if you don’t like it,” he retorts in a sham of being surly, betrayed when he returns the squeeze that she tightens around him like pulling on laces.

“I might just,” she jokes painfully, like such frivolity could be the reason she’d decide to leave – or that she’d do it for any other reason than she has to. “I don’t think he suspects… this, though,” she continues before the wound can be opened too far. “Not if he’s trying to console me about your indifference.”

“Let me get this straight,” he sets out, “he thought you hold me in better regard than I do you?”

“Something to that effect,” she replies humorously. If their exchanges when Thomas was around were the only taken into consideration, Daud has been surly with her about as often as he hasn’t, and some of his blunt lines that she knew to take as mocking could’ve easily been misinterpreted from their softer undercurrents.

“Then he’s lost his edge,” he scorns. “I taught him better than that.”

“Funny,” she remarks. “He said the same about you.” She feels him move, tilting her head up to find him looking at her. “How you’ve gone soft,” she rather teases, fingertips digging into the giving patch of fat that sits just noticeable over his belly, then is shaken with the breathy scoff that puffs from him.

“Wasn’t any other way to go from where I started,” he comments without a trace of denial, though doesn’t say anything how he’s changed since she got here; the way a man who slept, ate and worked without so much as a kind word – all while he categorised every way she could have been slaughtered by someone like him – now lies in bed with her just talking. “What?” he poses when her staring drags on

Without proper prompt or reason Emily stretches forward, not making it all the way but clearly
asking for a kiss by the way she waits. Luckily for her, he cranes in the rest of the way to grant it, nothing as impassioned as before, but a tender press of lip to lip.

*What was that for?* She asks herself as she slides back into the shape that’s practically been made for her beside him, setting a terribly warm cheek against his chest and trying not to give it too much thought as she falls asleep to the rhythmic beat of his heart.

Chapter End Notes

Now there's not much... else... that happens in this chapter except for the big overdone payoff, but I believe I said where Emily and Daud left off before being interrupted by Thomas would come back around, and behold it did. And how.
The Fifty-Seventh Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily and Daud: stripped.

Chapter Notes

This one took 2 hours of my time last night in the editing vortex, which I guess compensates for the light job I did of editing last week.

There's some BONUS spice towards the end of this one, so it's sort of a longer experience than some of the other chapters. We're this far in now, who knows/cares anyway?

This one goes out to everyone who wondered why I put so much attention into the shower 50 chapters ago. You're all welcome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first time Emily wakes from her terribly satisfying slumber it’s with the vague awareness that Daud is trying to get up from underneath her. Her response to the situation is to grab hold of whatever parts of him seem intent on moving away and pulling them back in place, the culminating effect of which is that she ends up balled against his chest, facing into him on one side with his arms wrapped all the way around her. Perfectly swaddled and feeling intensely safe, she’s blissfully off again without ever really making it into a state of awakeness.

The second time Emily’s roused by Daud’s attempted departure, she tries the same trick again. Except pulling on his arm like a bell-rope isn’t meriting the response she seeks, as he stubbornly resists her tugging.

“It’s been long enough, Emily.” In spite of this, she flips over with her eyes determinedly remaining shut.

“No,” she sums up her disagreement, sensing his weight leave the bed around her. Emily addresses this by rolling into the space Daud’s left behind, still warm and fresh with his scent. It lulls her back into the nap.

“Have it your way,” Daud’s voice rings out from further away, but she’s gone once more before any response can be generated.

The next time Emily wakes, it’s to a hand on her shoulder that’s been placed there with the explicit purpose of stirring her, and of which she’s immediately resentful. “Emily,” Daud says softly. “You can’t sleep all day.”

“Says who?” She pulls grumpily away from the touch, turning over to face the other way. Daud was the one who insisted on getting them up at the crack of dawn this morning. She’ll nap as she
“The man you’ll be keeping up all night if you do.” Daud’s knowing answer stirs something in Emily, the lingering heat of *being* with him that’s become a part of everything they do. The villain and stranger who has had such impact on her.

“No,” Emily bounces on Daud’s patience once more, but this time the lobby is less effective. The hand returns to her shoulder, fingers drumming rhythmically against her. “Ten more minutes.”

Daud’s sigh is impossibly long, but in the warmth of the afternoon even its small breeze is welcome.

“Fine.”

Emily’s promptly out again until the newest disturbance; a hand to hair she’s frustratedly pulled loose at some point in her lengthy nap.

“It’s time,” Daud says.

“Ten minutes.” Emily twists comfortably in the bedding.

“You’ve had them,” Daud points out, but she’s prepared for such circumstance.

“Ten more.”

“No.” He’s starting to sound irate, a grate in his voice that lacks the mellow qualities of Daud’s better humours. “Up.”

“Get back into bed or go away.” Emily bats at Daud’s hand as if to push it off, or perhaps pull it in depending on how he’s feeling, but then he moves differently and she’s suddenly wide awake. The curl of Daud’s arm around her midriff is precise, not affectionate. As mechanical in the same way he scoops Emily off the mattress as he had torn her away from her mother, or played at killing her dozens of time throughout this experience she’s reaching the final chapter of.

Emily thrashes as best she can, groggy and clumsy against Daud’s masterwork. The way his fingers press into her ribs for just long enough to be sure the message of what would’ve happened if the Knife of Dunwall had a blade on him is heard loud and clear. Emily shouldn’t be so bitter about the invasion on a moment of intimacy with this particular reminder, as she did try – succeed, she should surely say – to seduce Daud as a cover to kill a mark earlier on in his lessons.

But bundled up in a cocoon of the sheet and finding herself being tossed over Daud’s shoulder like a basket of peaches, Emily revises the extent of her empathy. “That’s a *rotten* trick.”

“Woke you up, didn’t it?” Daud replies with a full complement of indifference.

Emily’s attempts to dislodge herself from Daud’s shoulder are ineffective, and she settles into the permission of his carrying her wherever it is they seem to be going. However, that doesn’t mean she’s letting the issue go entirely. Wondering whether Daud has ever used the raw carnal energy he seems to draw from a limitless supply when they’re together, Emily settles on the question that has piqued her morbid interest in this man – hands that pick peaches or potatoes nowadays, but have spilled enough blood to keep the land fertilised long after this occupant is gone. “Have ever done *this* with someone you were contracted to kill?”

“I’d slip a mark the knife before they threw a tantrum for being woken up from a nap.” Daud’s scorn rings off the plaster walls and stone floors of the house as he arrives with her in the kitchen.
“Answer the question,” Emily’s tone shifts, and Daud stops too, taking a deep breath that she feels through his back, still folded over his shoulder like an over-affectionate cat.

“Once,” Daud’s tone is why Emily knows what he’s speaking about, “and it cost extra.”

“You’re making that up.”

“Look it up,” Daud replies like he couldn’t care less for her suspicions. “Constance Boyle.”

Emily’s eyes widen, a gasp on her lips somewhere between ‘oh’ and ‘no’. Aware of what she’s been taught about the demise of the famed Matriarch of the Boyles, Emily now has immediate cause to doubt it, and would go look it up right now if she wasn’t still lumped over Daud like a carpet.

Daud starts walking again, pausing in the kitchen merely to absorb the then-strewn ambiance about the place. Emily waits until he’s just at the doorway onto the terrace, Emily shoots out her arms to bar across it, stopping them and – more importantly – catching him off guard to do it. “Incidentally, where are you taking me?”

“Shower,” Daud replies stonily. That will certainly wake her up, and it’s better than a dirty forge, but still not where Emily would like to be, which is back in bed with him for a mattress, ideally.

“I’m awake already.” Emily counterproductively breaks the barricade against the door to rub a stray crust of sleep from her eyes, but Daud lets her down anyway. No longer carried like a rolled rug, Emily resorts to holding the bedsheets around her chest to keep it from falling to the floor, and isn’t sure how she feels about the look on Daud’s face – like he’s only just keeping his mouth from splitting into that uncanny and just a little unnerving grin. “This isn’t funny, I’ll have you know.”

“Never said it was,” Daud replies in a way that sounds like he finds it even more amusing when she objects. “Do I get my sheet back?”

“What do I wear then?” Emily pitches with a little more humour, starting to consider that a shower might not be such a bad idea after all. She feels rather… tacky, and not only from the sweat.

“Not my problem,” Daud bats back with a glimmer in his eye like he might rip it straight off her if she doesn’t keep her wits about her.

Casting around the kitchen, Emily identifies a nearby piece of clothing on the floor as Daud’s shirt, shuffling over still wrapped in the sheet. Her trousers are bunched up with her boots right next to the door, and she can turn to look down the corridor – all the way into Daud’s room – and pick out the trail of discarded clothes with a touch of warmth to her face. Like she can’t quite believe it was them, outside the heat of the moment.

Daud is watching her, as he almost always does, but there’s something about the gaze that makes her tilt her back to him as she swaps the sheet for his shirt. There’s an air of disparity in the air, something about the way Daud’s fully dressed again while she’s draped in various inadequate pieces of cloth, or maybe just that she can’t have him keep looking at her like that all the time without starting to ask herself questions she’s not prepared to answer.

He notices, of course and when he delivers in his rough tones a singular and slightly sceptical inquiry that runs to the effect of, “Shy?” Daud might as well have added another ten years to the difference in age between them, a practically teenage feeling swallowing her whole.

Emily pushes through a couple of the buttons on Daud’s shirt and then leaves it at that, managing to be just about covered. But only just – it’s an effect she rather enjoys. She whips around to face
him, eyebrows arching up her forehead and a well assembled look of utter scathing.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Daud doesn’t respond, just keeps watching like he’s painting her into his memory, and it’s not long before Emily gives into the crushing silence. “I think I’ll... take that shower after all,” she carries on into the air that weighs more and more every moment they go without speaking.

Daud gives an iconic “Hm,” but elaborates no further.

Emily wonders what’s on his mind, but at the same time doesn’t dare to ask, fearing the translation of whatever is in his face as he takes her in, half-lit from the afternoon sun through the kitchen window dressed in one of his shirts and nothing else.

“Well?” Emily reasons that being aloof keeps them away from the terrible joy of sincerity, the times when just being with and around Daud is all the occupation she needs.

“Well what?” Daud prompts, only half-amused.

“Are you going to join me?” Emily states like Daud ought to have taken the implication as read, and one half of his mouth lifts. Bickering for sport is one thing, but Thomas is surely miles away by now and Emily has all kinds of things she’d like Daud’s participation in before the scarce time they have is cut off.

Daud knows it too, because he gives a simple nod. “With pleasure.”

The first time Emily watched Daud shower, it was from the branches of a nearby tree, and at the time she’d been rather mortified by his nakedness in a way that was totally reasonable under the circumstances. Even if she had peeked a little more than if she’d had no interest whatsoever in his material charms.

How little she’d understood, Emily reflects as she wanders down the path and catches sight of Daud stood on top of the wall the shower’s mounted, bucket in hand. She stayed longer in the house, venturing upstairs to fetch things to wash with as well, as the comb she tugs through the length of her hair even as she approaches.

Daud blinks a short way in front of Emily and sets the empty bucket down, water starting to stream through the perforated container that makes up the key component of the rig. Daud removes fresh clothes he’d put on after waking up from their post-coital nap, hanging them on the wooden peg that exists for that reason alone before stepping under the stream.

“I just climb the wall,” Emily says.

Daud bows his head and a shudder runs through him at the onslaught of cold water, even in this pressing heat. “Easier on my knees,” he explains gruffly, and Emily pulls a sympathetic face that might also be terribly amused – poor him, in a look.

“I’ve not noticed any problems with them.” Emily parts the scarce few buttons she needs to slip off Daud’s shirt before adding it to the clothes on the wall, smothering any notion of feeling self-conscious as she strips as naked in the open air in front of a quietly interested Daud. Emily’s done all of these things before, and yet the combination is somehow greater than the sum of its parts.

“You wouldn’t.” Daud tips his head back and running, his hands from his face back over his head.
If not for Emily’s presence, she knows he’d be facing the wall, as she’d seen him once before. Even that small adjustment is something she can’t help notice – how his bespoke world shifts around her.

“Any room for me in there?” It’s a gentle tease, and Daud wordlessly shifts over to accord her some space under the stream. Shivering as she steps under the water, Daud’s arm is pleasingly warm against her back, which is making efficient use of the space in wrapping securely around her around her. Emily lets herself be folded up in Daud like paper flowers, holding herself under the shower and wiping her face off as her hair forms a slow-soaking helmet over her head.

Hands settling against Daud’s chest as a mere matter of positioning, she spreads her fingers and rubs idly, wiry hair coarse against her skin, tilting her head out of the stream and pushing hair off her forehead. He follows her example, wide palm traversing the length of her back. More than ever, she’s trying to catalogue him – for later.

“Swap with me,” Emily requests after a while, and in his own mute appreciation Daud obliges her without qualm. He steps as good as out of the shower as she puts her head back and starts to wring the great mass of her hair under the heaviest part of the stream. Though she’d be too embarrassed to admit it to him, knowing just how smug he’d be, she usually has it washed for her back in Dunwall, at least if expected to look presentable for formal occasions – which is most, in the tower, unfortunately.

Once wet all the way through, Emily reaches around Daud to fish for soap from a pocket of the shirt that’s temporarily hers for these purposes. She’s a little envious of the practicality Daud’s sparse stylings afford, not even half-way done lathering her hair when the water runs out, using the respite to finish the job and then waiting impatiently as a breeze makes her hair stand on end with chill.

“I also prepare more than one bucket,” she points out as if lecturing the air, folding her arms over her torso, just under her breasts where nipples pucker from the cold.

“I don’t need it.” Daud’s voice echoes somewhere between amused and impatient with the additional burden this supposedly simple act has taken on with Emily’s involvement.

Emily knows exactly how Daud manages to fit an entire functional shower into the run-time of a single bucket, but keeps the knowledge to herself for now.

“You propose to leave me like this?” Emily throws out her hands while a soaped tail of hair coils over one shoulder.

“You propose that I should fetch you more water?” Daud turns back on her. If he’s *stirred* by the sight of her naked, beaded with water and suds – physically at least he seems to be checking out – then he’s doing a rather good job of not showing it in his attitude.

“Why else do you think I invited you?” Daud scoffs and Emily decides she’s having none of it. “*Daud,*” she tries in her best imperial tone.

“Fine,” Daud concedes with a lazily waving hand, turning around and snatching up the bucket to pace over to the pump. It’s a view Emily is *more* than happy to appreciate in this context once more, mindlessly working through her hair as she watches him, taking the conscious effort to really *look* at him, a body hardened and worn with more experience than she’s yet lived. He’s rather top heavy, and she considers whether he was so back in his time as the terror of her city, or if a decade of labouring on the land has changed him physically too.
Having filled the bucket, Daud turns around, eyes scanning over Emily before he pieces away into the void. She looks over her shoulder at him atop the wall, readying to decant into the shower – when, at the last moment a wicked grin splits his cheek. Daud tips the whole bucket straight onto her.

“Daud!” she screeches as a column of icy groundwater pummels over her, pasting her hair to her face as it gushes over her head.

“You’ve done it to yourself enough,” she hears him remark from up top, voice continuing from back on the ground in front of her while she shoves her hair indignantly out of her eyes, “I should think you wouldn’t min-” is exactly how far Daud gets before Emily throws herself at him, slamming a fist into his shoulder with a furious noise.

“I’ve advance notice when I do that!” Emily bats at Daud in a way that he seems to think is insignificant or funny enough not to interfere with. Though she’s not using absolutely all of her strength, it’s probably still enough to hurt a little – or so she hopes as she keeps knocking her fist on his chest like she’s trying to find out if he’s still got a heart in there. “If you weren’t going to help why’d you even-”

“That’s enough,” he drawls easily, and without warning her wrist is stopped dead in his hand. Not having restrained her left hand, Emily whips it vindictively into the meat of his arm, and this time Daud actually winces.

“Dirty, rotten trick-” she steams, pummelling him further.

“All right,” Daud growls as Emily’s left hand also gets snatched into his grip.

“I’m just getting started.” Emily twists suddenly to jab a sharp elbow into him.

“Emily!” Daud snaps, finally retaliating before she nails him right between the ribs, giving a hiss as she snatches her hands out of his grip. “I said that’s en-”

The reason Daud’s cut off is due to Emily putting a newly escaped hand behind his neck. She pulls herself to him rather more than she brings him over to her, but with a mouthful of lip he’s hard pressed to protest.

The kiss occurs so suddenly Emily’s she’s barely even aware of what she’s doing until after she’s done it, though a moment later Daud clearly has no inclination to carry on talking anyway. His hand comes to rest on her back and he tilts into the deepening kiss, even a dalliance of tongue before they draw back far more amicably than they began.

“And what was that for?” he asks, releasing her other hand and picking up a tendril of hair stuck down the side of her face, rubbing it between his fingers. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“Would you please,” she says quietly, “get another bucket of water?”

“For you, this once, and any other time you ask,” he concedes almost sweetly, bringing fingers under her chin to lift into another peck before he goes back around – this time putting the water where it’s supposed to be.

It’s hardly an altruistic act because Daud’s not finished showing either. With the dramatics settled and a new window of running water that isn’t falling all at the same time, Daud begins trailing his hands in practiced routine across his body while Emily rinses the soap out of her hair.

“I’ve watched you do this before, you know,” she summons out of the blue, so amused with the
ritual that it slips out even though she wasn’t quite decided about letting Daud know that. Emily considers the consequences of riding her impulses around him so much, as she seems unable to control even her own tongue anymore.

“What?” Daud’s head is tipped to one side as he works a hand around the back of his neck. A moment’s consideration later it becomes, “When?”

“When you had me hiding from you,” she cites – it’s out now so she might as well come clean, as they’re in the process.

“So you watched me shower?”

“Not on purpose,” she retorts like that makes it totally excusable. “I was getting some water when I heard you coming, so I hid.”

“Where?” That Daud asks means he surely couldn’t have known, and as long ago as it was emotionally speaking, Emily still glows with satisfaction that she really had pulled it off.

“Turn around,” she instructs, and then a little more playfully. “I’ll do your back.” Daud’s eyebrow lifts a fraction, but he complies anyway.

The latter half of Emily’s instruction isn’t strictly necessary so much as she wants to do it, laying hands across the well-cut shape of Daud’s back where water channels between shoulder-blades, feeling what she’d been so indisposed to looking away from back then. One notable difference from before is the lacework of scratches she put across his shoulders earlier, starting to fade under a dressing of cool water. He’s not the only one struggling to grasp his lack of control, she muses as she runs fingertips over the slightly raised ridges.

“See the trees?” Emily lays a cheek to the edge of Daud’s shoulder as she peers around him.

“You,” he starts slowly, and she sees his hand raising to his face to pinch at the bridge of his nose, “hid up there, watching me?”

“It’s not like I planned it,” she defends. “I was merely trying to avoid being found, and you happened to be here to take a shower, which I happened to be able to see. What was I supposed to do?”

“Not?” The way Daud says it makes it sound reasonable, though Emily’s adamant she’s in the right. “There are places to hide that don’t come with a view.” And what a view, Emily observes with a smirk.

“I didn’t know that’s what you were minded to do until you started doing it,” she argues, “and besides, you’d have noticed if I moved away.” Daud doesn’t argue with her on that.

“So how much did you see?” That this is his next question is wonderful and awful; how he’s enough of a human to be concerned with such a thing. Emily makes a little room between them to slide a hand along the curve of Daud’s back reaching surely downwards. He’s put his hands just about all over her at some point or another, which from where she’s standing means she’s got some catching up to do.

“Some.” She uses an indicative grope, and Daud is an interesting kind of still in her hands. “I was mostly holding my breath and hoping you didn’t notice me.”

“No,” he says softly, unprotesting of her handling him like so many prime cuts of meat. “I didn’t.” Emily relishes a rare, near-priceless moment: she clicks her tongue at Daud, the way he’s done to
her so many times.

“Your predictability got the better of you.” Even as she tuts away, Emilys other hand creeps around Daud’s front to circle his stomach. She slowly but surely tightens the hold, enjoying the feeling of being pressed against him like this under the cooling stream of water. Daud takes a deep breath and his back pushes against her breasts, while the palm on his front sinks a little lower.

“Emily.” Daud issues warning against the way her hands are wandering, fingers dancing along the boundaries of his crotch.

“How observant of you.” She moves to take a proper hold of him and registering the rush of breath in his throat as she does. “Does it bother you?”

“Not that,” Emily toys, though certainly doesn’t stop altogether. “My… spying.” It’s a less impure way to put it than ‘peeping’, which would also definitely fit.

“It’s a little unorthodox,” Daud consider, “but the challenge was what you could do without my knowing, so you,” his hesitation could as equally be due to Emily’s ongoing ministrations about his person, or because he’s poised to say something unorthodox in its own right, “did well.”

“Why thank you,” Emily lords, pleased when picking up the speed of her hand evokes a little noise from Daud’s throat. “Anything else you’d like to compliment while we’re on the subject of my merits?” The water from the shower has long since stopped, but they’re clean enough – certainly for the way things are going.

“Ah, that’s easy,” he replies in his warmest tone, starting to just discernibly rock at the hips into each of her strokes. “Your endless modesty.”

Hands to the wall of the open-air shower, bent over biting her bottom lip as she braces herself against the bounce of Daud’s weight into her is not a situation Emily would’ve anticipated being in more than a few days ago – or even when they came down here to shower not half an hour ago for that matter, but what she’s certainly not doing is complaining.

“How’s that?” Daud checks from behind her, hands on her hips as she lifts up on her toes and angles into him him.

“How’s that?” Daud checks from behind her, hands on her hips as she lifts up on her toes and angles into him him.

“Mmn,” is how far the eloquence of her reply stretches, arched between him and the rough stonework. To have ended up like this again, already, when she’d truly had no such intentions at
the outset – had acknowledged it was a *possibility*, yes – but it’s as if a single lapse in attention and they’ll revert to this raw pleasure. A little rawer than usual by now, as in less than three days they’ve engaged in it rather a lot by any standards, much less people with ten-or-more years out of the game or having only just been inducted to this particular act. Not that it’s deterred them in the slightest. Even Thomas being here hadn’t quite stopped them, the frustration of denial still echoing now.

Emily makes a noise that’s a little more discomfort than pleasure, friction not quite working to their advantage in this setting, and Daud stops as if commanded. “I’m fine,” she insists before he can fuss, but after a last flex Daud unexpectedly withdraws.

“Think that’s enough for now.”

“I said I’m fine,” she insists.

“It’s not all about you,” Daud’s sharp enough that Emily bites her tongue, but his hand is still soothing in a stroke across her lower back and behind; at least, right before it lifts and comes back down in a light slap over one of her cheeks as he adds a sordid murmur, “There’s always later.”

**But for how much longer?** Emily thinks despairingly, before determinedly snapping the other way lest she start thinking about the L-word she’s so dreading the inevitability of. Which is Leaving. Obviously.

“Did you just spank me?” she shoots with theatrical rage.

“What?” Daud seems more invested in getting dressed, tossing the shirt Emily’s making loan of at her as she comes to face him to get to his own clothes. “That was a pat.” Daud brings his shirt up over his shoulders, already dry in the late afternoon heat, then fixes Emily with a look she might call mischievous should she be so bold as to pin such an emotion on him. “You’d know if I spanked you.” It sounds almost like a promise.

“You’re in a good mood,” Emily observes as they finish dressing. “Anyone would think you’re happy I’m still here.” And no one else is; a situation that Daud surely wouldn’t have engineered himself, and Emily dreads to think of scenarios in which she hadn’t taken it upon herself. Where they’d have parted ways in that stilted way that they’d said goodbye to Thomas earlier today.

“I am,” Daud admits as freely as if he’d never locked such inclinations in a safe with metres-thick walls. Unbidden by anything else reaches a hand for her face, shadowing a cheek as he buries her in another of those examining looks. His arm bends as if weighted at the elbow as she leans in, turned up to him for a kiss he delivers about as soon as she realises she’s invited it.

It flows slowly, the pressure of his mouth on hers, bristle scraping where their skin meets, and again seems to happen before Emily takes stock of what she’s doing. As if it’s become so easy to do that it takes no more than a minor distraction before she’s engaging Daud him like there’s something really going on between them. Something with meaning.

They come apart but stay close, eyes on each other and a look that doesn’t quite know what it is. For a purportedly happy person, Daud only half looks it.

“What?” Emily fumbles for something to say that’s not questions she can’t endure hearing the answer to – like whether Daud is dreading her departure like she is in the moments she accidentally thinks about it.

“Nothing,” Daud replies thankfully, and drops the hand from her face. “Come along.”
Half-way down the path, resolutely pretending she’s not way too far into her own head, Emily leaps several feet out of her skin when Daud’s hand whips through the air and cracks against her backside so sharply she lets out a completely undignified yelp. She whirls around to face him too shocked to do anything except stare with wide eyes and a mouth hanging mutely open.

“Now *that*,” Daud comments as a slow but sure transformation takes place in Emily’s expression, morphing from shock to indignation as she tries desperately to process what in all the void has gotten *into* him, “was a spank.”

Daud blinks out of the way when Emily rushes him in retaliation, and continues to stroll peacefully down the path back to the house. Not subject to the world outside this microcosm anymore, and aware that she and Daud can do *whatever* they want *whenever* they want, Emily breaks into a wide grin and begins the chase.

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Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the vicious cycle of me making myself making you making myself sad about the upcoming separation the end of this fic foretells. That deep, exquisite shipping pain yes give it to me.

Also spanking: yes, also give it to me. *Throws on shades*
The Fifty-Eighth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Daud calls Emily a cut-throat. He’s right.

Chapter Notes

This chapter goes out to all the readers on board for more SPICE. This is your official warning.

Also welcome to any new(ish) readers who found this story after being inspired from the new DLC. I’ve heard mixed things about what they’ve done with the characters, but this story predates even DH2’s release and I parted ways with the canon when they decided Callista wasn’t going to be a thing anymore. How dare they.

Also consider this a footnote to the character of sub!Daud, who we will get to see some more of as things progress. Though there's also some assertive, in-charge Daud too because I'm all about that role flexibility ;)

Speaking of roles, I just got offered a new job so that's something! This story has followed me through a whole period of my life and it'll be fitting to wind it down just as I start getting stuck into something new, on which note there's about 6 chapters to go plus an epilogue in-progress, so we should be all wrapped up here by the end of October! This chapter takes us over 200k finally, which I would've never imagined when I started out writing. What a trip :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s of a time to start thinking about dinner, when they – as it’s so inarguably become – get back to the house. A roundabout game of chase interferes with the usual quick stroll, after Daud puts what Emily can’t properly make out but thinks to be a fairly distinctive handprint on her backside. He even dares to seem smug about it, evading Emily’s pursuit with the air of a leaf blowing on the breeze, enjoying as ever the fact that she will chase him.

The difference now is that Emily can actually catch Daud, even when he’s trying not to be caught: it’s a triumph of her growth in ability. Because it’s Daud, Emily knows it doesn’t need to be said. She can read it in his face the moment she catches him, managing to blink through the kitchen window and pin him to the back wall at long last.

Another point of difference is surely Daud’s reaction to being caught. The only thing he seems to enjoy more than denying Emily what she wants is when she gets in the end, the awed admiration that takes him over as she holds him to the wall, no need for a literal dagger when she can simply hold her hand over his throat. Daud’s raspy voice buzzes against her fingers. “Good for you.”

Emily bites her lip, thinking that this current arcing through the air might be something to do with their decidedly unfinished business from the shower. Though Daud’s self-proclaimed spank was
delivered in a joking way, it’s not quite the same feeling Emily gets thinking about it now. Certainly not the playful outrage that she chased him around with for a quarter of an hour before getting fed up and retreating indoors – far from it.

Daud gives Emily one of his most famous looks among this household, and then with a knowing air asks her, “You hungry?”

Emily’s a little disorientated in the day after her lengthy nap, but the suggestion of food conjures some appetite in her. Especially Daud’s cooking, these meals she’s trying not to count because there’s only a few left.

Partly because she’s still holding him to the wall in mock death, and perhaps because trying not to think about leaving is very much the same as thinking about leaving, Emily decides to skip answering Daud’s question and kiss him square on the mouth, a gesture he receives with the same pleased endurance as all her ever-more-frequent spontaneous gestures.

Daud is lax against the wall when Emily pulls away, still seeming to bask in this endless serenity that he’s found in the fact of her still being here. Emily wishes she were even half as content as the lazy, appreciative way Daud’s hand comes to linger on her hip.

“I should put something on to cook anyway,” he says in an outrageously sultry manner. “For later.”

“We might work up an appetite.” Emily has totally undressed the implication and just bares the sordid underbelly with a wildly opportunistic air, but Daud dedicates himself to the kitchen, and seems to know better than to accept Emily’s help – knowing where it leads.

Emily wanders into the bedroom and holes up in Daud’s armchair, firmly awake but still dozy in the soporific afternoon heat. She takes a book from the shelves outside the more morbid section of Daud’s library, for once not feeling the urge to go piecing around in the bloodthirsty mess of his past.

Tales of Pandyssia, this one reads in the distinctive slant of his handwriting, and any such intrigue of the mysterious Eastern continent is occupation enough for a lazy afternoon. But when Emily flips the book open, the text within is unreadable; a script she’s no knowledge of that sprawls across the page in a way that seems to defy any known alphabet.

Emily turns the page and finds a map, not of the Pandyssian continent itself but a section of coastline, special detail given to the islands. A flip to another page and Emily recognises the islands off the Eastern coast of Serkonos, identified both in the peculiar script and subtitled The Stepping Stones, locations marked with further flairs of the curling script.

Footsteps sound down the hallway, and Emily lifts her head, turning around in the chair to watch the door and mark his entrance.

“Dinner’s on.” Daud gravitates towards Emily by matter of course as he crosses the room, and as soon as they are close enough for it to be natural, his hand slips over the back of the chair, resting lightly on her shoulder as he examines what she’s reading.

“What language is this?” Emily asks.

“The same one you’ve heard before,” he answers, squinting as he tries to spy over her shoulder and perhaps hasn’t the eyes for it. She remembers the eyeglasses. “Helping yourself to my secrets again?” It’s only a gentle tease, so Emily turns the other cheek. Specifically, she turns her cheek to press alongside the back of Daud’s hand, a smell of garlic and unknown spices lingering on his
“You told me that was a merchants’ dialect,” she points out scholastically. “This lettering is ancient.”

“It’s for traders now,” he responds, “but much as it may shock you, your Empire is not the only to have existed in this world.”

“I make no such claims,” Emily replies. “So it’s Pandyssian?”

“May’ve been, once,” he answers. “All I know is it came with those who fled the islands off the shores of continent long before it fell to ruin.”

“How do you know that much?” she probes as his hand finally leaves her shoulder. No academies up here for him to garner such knowledge from.

“Stories,” he answers, moving slowly for the desk. “There are communities across the stones such as the trader is from, but their history is largely oral. She’s one of the few who still holds them in the old form, so as a fancy of habit I compiled some of the tales in the original script.”

“I didn’t take you for a scholar,” she jests mildly.

“I certainly wouldn’t,” he counters. “It’s a hobby at best.”

“So this is your writing?” He nods. “Did you know the script already, or-”

“I learned,” he interjects. “It’s the same tongue my mother shared, but she taught me nothing beyond what I knew by ear,” he reveals such things as if it could truly be said so easily, settling into his desk chair sideways; he could use better seating here, she reflects incidentally.

“It’s beautiful,” she compliments.

“Dead and dying, she called it,” he contradicts. “Useless to a child of Serkonos at the turn of the century.” The way he phrases it scandalises just a touch – she’d known he was born in the last century should she give it thought, just as her father is, but obviously hadn’t until now. It’s strange to think of Daud as a child, born of woman like anyone else and not forged out of dark magic and bloodshed in some unholy ritual; then again there’s no saying both couldn’t be true.

“Why the stepping stones?” she remarks, turning her eyes back to the page. It’s not the common terminology for the arpeggio of islands stretching off the coast of Serkonos, but then common is merely a matter of perspective, she’s learned by now.

“Landing places from the journey off the continent,” he replies. “The coastal isles in more recent times, when the mainland was all but ruin.”

“Have you been?”

“Once,” he replies enigmatically. “Though it’s not a trip I’d recommend.”

“Why?”

“The route’s gotten rougher over the years,” he answers. “Used to be ships might make passage from the Pandyssian isles to the Stones with greater ease, bringing goods from the homeland for those who fled here, but the trade’s all but dried up in my lifetime.”

She flips back to the first page and examines the passage again.
“What about before then?” she asks.

“Before what?”

“Your lifetime,” she poses with a twinkle in her eye. “Or is that already pre-modern?”

“Very funny,” he gripes. “You mean before the collapse of the Pandyssian civilisation?”

“So you believe there was one?” she remarks.

“It’s only your scholars in the Academy who could dispute such an obvious fact,” he replies a little caustically. “You hold the evidence in your lap.” She flips through the pages only to find more of the indecipherable text, so looks to him for an explanation. “The oral history is passed from generation to generation,” he begins to translate in a sense. “It tells of a kingdom on the mainland whose power overflowed as far as the oceans are wide. A people skilled in astral navigation and ship construction that’s long been lost.”

“I’ve heard the claims Karnaca was once a great trading city in the centuries long before Dunwall came to prominence,” she offers, but he seems underwhelmed by the suggestion.

“It was the farthest reach of an old Empire,” he explains surely. “Why else would Old Serkonian bear such similarity to languages derived from Pandyssia?”

“Let me guess, you know Old Serkonian too?” she suggests a little facetiously. Like there’s nothing he can’t do.

“I read some,” he answers. “There’s a few books of it on the shelf.” She knows he has a few things he didn’t pen himself within his collection – had caught him sleeping over one once upon a time.

“Where did you get them?” she puts to him.

“They were here when I arrived,” he replies in a way that’s quite definitely smug. “This place and the people who laid the first stones here are tied to that same history.”

“So by willpower alone you learned to read it?” she teases, but it’s indicative of an intellect he wields just as well as the weapons he once used to.

“There’s a little that can be translated through connections to the common tongue, but only when I regained lost language of the trader did the remaining pieces of the puzzle fall into place.”

“A fine hobby indeed,” she commends.

“It isn’t always so lively around here,” he answers, a sting in his words as she considers the implications; the time it would have taken to compile the books that fill the shelves, scratched out over the desk over long winter months. Things he’ll return to after she’s gone.

The silence breaks with a whine of wood over wood as he pulls open one of the drawers in the desk, fishing out a glass container of oil and folded implement that is revealed to be a razor when he unfolds the blade.

“You’re going to shave?” she applauds.

“Picked up the hints you’ve been dropping,” he understates – hints in a sense of direct and repeated requests, of course. “And the stubble itches.” Daud draws a weathered hand across his jaw with a sandpapery rasp, and Emily atunes herself back to Daud’s body in addition to his mind.
“It’s a fine proposal,” Emily says as she folds the illegible book back up, “though lacking in one respect.” Daud watches her for the end of the bit, sensing the playful energy of her tone and ever-amused – at least in private – with her Imperial jargon. “May I do it?”

Daud gives her a puzzled look, thoughts pinching his brows together as he comes to the conclusion that yes, she really did say what he heard. “You know how?”

“Who else do you think Corvo would let so close to his throat with a razor when he couldn’t do it for himself?” she poses, “and besides,” she pauses for a second, knowing this part’s the kicker, but has no sooner had the thought than known she has to say it. “Don’t you trust me?”

Daud’s gaze travels across the short space between them with a sense that he can’t – or won’t – try to put into words all the things he holds in such steely eyes. His answer full of foreboding. “Very well.”

Daud’s head lays back over the top of his armchair, tilted to one side as Emily spreads oil across the rough bristles, exfoliating the skin of her fingers as much as she works it into his. His eyelids hang low but don’t shut, and she’s tipped him to the left first – leave the scar for later.

“So how often have you done this for Corvo?” he murmurs, small movements of his jaw under her fingertips as she rubs small circles that aren’t entirely about distribution anymore. She likes having him here in this position, turned up under her with the top of his grey-streaked head resting against her ribs.

“Whenever he was injured and it needed doing,” she answers methodically, finally moving on and inspecting the razor she passes from her other hand. No need to sharpen it, she suspects, as he keeps all his blades meticulously sharp.

“How often’s that?” he poses.

“More often than he’d like,” she returns. “He has a habit of putting his sword arm out being somewhere he shouldn’t on the eve before a formal event.” Like rooftops around the homes of their supposed allies; crashing through their skylights on one particularly unfortunate occasion. “So if you happen to dislocate your shoulder I can see to that too.” Daud gives a scoff, then stills when she puts an instructive touch to his face to still him, tugging skin taut before carefully beginning to draw the blade up his cheek. Flicks the dark-light mix off the blade and goes back in. “Is that all right?”

Remaining still, he just gives a permissive murmur, vibrations of which she feels against her hands as she holds him still and brings the edge of the razor across his skin again, following the direction the hair grows.

“What did you do?” she asks the next time she brings it clear, leaning over to dip a couple of fingertips into the open pot of oil on the table and reappling across the line of his jaw. Another murmur; this one inquisitive. “When you couldn’t shave yourself,” she specifies. He’s got scars enough to tell that there must have been times he wasn’t able to lift a razor to his face.

“Grew a beard,” he rasps, stilling again as she lowers back over him. So does Corvo now, giving up the battle to remain clean-shaven and resorting to merely keeping his fast-growing facial hair trimmed; no matter what he’d be stubble again by the time the day was out, so to hell with the Dunwall fashions he’d decided in the end. Daud would be more in-keeping with the style, if he could maintain the chore enough to make him decidedly one thing or the other, and not just rough
around the edges. Like the rest of him.

As she proceeds, Emily wonders if Daud likes being this helpless in her hands; if it’s liberating or unnerving, and whether he trusts her enough to believe she wouldn’t hurt him – or perhaps doesn’t care if she does. He seems relaxed enough, gentle breaths that pull in and out of him as she proceeds toward the centre of his face.

“Though there was one time,” he adds when she next moves away, something tumbling from lips almost unbidden. “… Lurk did.”

“Did she now?” she remarks ordinarily, like she’s really a barber giving him the standard conversational cues as she goes about his shave. Tilts his head a little further back with a light touch, and with a roll his eyes meet hers.

“I wanted to appear recovered faster than I was,” he says. “My people knew if I wasn’t shaved then something was off, so I let her…” It gets left unresolved in much the same way Emily suspects things are between them, if what she’s observed is anything to draw from.

“She hurt you,” she states in the same way as before, like they’re making idle chit-chat. Only she means it in some deeper way that a nick while shaving – something she’d hesitate to term betrayal not for lack of truth, but not to tug too hard on such a sore nerve.

“Not as bad as I hurt her,” he returns darkly, and she’d say he has a talent for that if she were feeling crueller.

“Turn,” she instructs first, finished with one cheek. He shifts and cavernous scar opens up under her.

“Careful round there,” he comments as she draws investigative fingertips over the ridges of scar tissue. “There’s a knack to it.”

“I’m hardly going to make it any worse,” she tries to joke, fingering his jaw as she strokes her thumb down the final section, and his eyes flit lower, lids descending. “What did you do to her?” she asks a little quieter as she oils him like a wheel to be greased.

“Threw her out of the only home she’d ever had a place in,” he answers lowly, and she moves back in with the razor over a strip of his cheek that doesn’t quite count as a sideburn, sharpening his hairline all the way up to the arching foundations of his widow’s peak.

She doesn’t have to ask why, so instead remarks, “What else could you have done?”

“Sacrifice my command,” he offers, pausing as she brings the blade back to his face, loose skin pulled tight as she follows the gaunt contours of his face. “Which I threw away so soon it barely mattered.”

“It doesn’t matter either way now,” she points out up finishing the side, squaring his face again with just a patch in the middle of his chin, plus the moustache that she imagines looking comically endearing should he let it grow out – is half tempted to leave it if he wouldn’t obviously finish the job should she fail to take it adequately to task. “The past is just that.”

He lets out a thoughtful noise that buzzes under Emily’s fingers like touching a piece of machinery. If he’s looking at her, burning away with one of those deeply heated stares, she doesn’t see, fixated on persuading the edge of the razor across the slight cleft in his chin.

He can’t take any of it back, she thinks, and even if he could, there’s a part of her that whispers –
for all the wrong it’d undo, fractured lives that might have been fixed if he could choose to un-make any of his history books’ worth of decisions. Were anything different, she wouldn’t be here with him now.

And being here with him, in this moment, feels meaningful enough to make some kind of peace with.

With the flat of the razor resting in the pit of her palm, Emily cups his face in her hands and stoops over to pluck a kiss from Daud’s mouth like fruit from a tree. He looks at her with questioning eyes, same question as he’d lobbied at her earlier when impulse took her over and stuck her tongue down his throat in the blink of an eye. What was that for? Like she couldn’t be naturally possessed with such an inclination.

“The moment was ripe,” she excuses, citing lessons back at him as she takes in the silly picture he makes; steely blue eyes and clean shaven but for his upper lip and neck, staring at her like he’s waiting to be made into a sacrifice. She almost thinks he would become one, if she wanted it enough. Smoothing a touch across his mouth made slick with a fresh dab of oil, she tilts him again and takes the blade back to his skin, shearing the grayed stubble across his lip with precise movements.

It’s a tricky bit, so Emily doesn’t speak, hardly even breathes, and there’s a stillness to the moment that sinks right into her bones. Daud kept her as far away as possible for so long, out of fear for what she’d do to him should she get the opportunity, so to hold him now, like this, is gratifying in a way she couldn’t hope to express. But Emily also knows that if she hadn’t been sincere in her own feelings towards Daud, he wouldn’t have made himself so willingly helpless in her hands.

He wriggles his nose after she finishes with it, light pinch to stretch the bow of his mouth enough to scrape the last few bristles from it, and breathes out with a light puff.

“Now your neck,” she announces quietly, resting her fingers against it so she can feel the throb of his pulse.

“It’s yours,” Daud hardly even breathes, but makes the words come out somehow.

Impulsively Emily changes position, coming around to the front of the armchair. Daud’s eyes follow carefully as she calmly and in a perfectly orderly fashion climbs into the chair, kneeling over Daud’s lap to approach the final stretch of the work from a new angle. He doesn’t question it, just hangs a heavy-lidded gaze over her as she dips her fingers in the lukewarm oil and works it into the slightly loose skin of his throat, chin tipping up to grant her the access she needs.

As she moves the sharpened edge in the first stroke, it occurs to Emily like the flex of a well-worked muscle of how easy it would be – a simple slip of fingers, and Daud’s throat would be cut right here. The hot blood that would pour out of such a wound and drain his remaining life away in a matter of minutes, like that of the assassin who’d put her here in the first place. Like her mother’s heart on the end of his sword. Even as she has the thought, Emily doesn’t think she would do it, but for a moment knows that she could, and it’s enough power to make her dizzy.

She’s as efficient as care permits, but it’ll take as long as it takes, and she doesn’t miss the pulse of all that blood rushing through his neck. His heart is racing.
“Am I making you nervous?” she dares to suggest, but to his credit he doesn’t even twitch. Merely sets a hand over her thigh, bare skin from underneath the shirt she’s still yet to add anything to, and holds her with the merest hint of tension.

“Just finish the job,” comes in a low murmur.

“You almost make it sound like you’re asking me to kill you,” she observes, still making a home for herself just past his comfort zone. What she’s supposed to do but test his boundaries and watch him bend?

“Haven’t I already?” he returns on as bold a question, and is entirely right.

“Hm,” she mimics in form, plying his chin around as she puts up a different part of his neck to scrape back to skin; he’s a faint scar she’s not noticed before, straight line across the side of his throat, high up nearly under the jaw. A mark of almost dying; or a way he survived, he might counter. “Then I’d surely make a poor assassin.” They’re a long way from filling such contracts on each other’s lives now.

“No,” he purrs, and when she looks up his face his eyes are closed. “You’d be one of the best.”

Though the rise and fall of his chest is controlled as ever, his pulse still speeds and she knows he’s overwhelming a better part of his instincts to remain so open to her. Wonders why he’s doing it.

“Are you trying to recruit me?” she teases, only for him to reach up and take her wrist in sure fingers, holding her in place as he lifts his head and opens steely eyes to look right at her.

“If you wanted, then you could be the most fearsome assassin I’ve ever known,” Daud tells like it’s something for Emily to hear – something for anyone to say – and her own pulse beats against the containment of his hand. “Never forget that.”

“Why?” she asks, brows furrowing.

“Because you should know what you could be, even if you never chose it.” While it’s not as if he’s being terribly encouraging, the neutrality of his voice as he delivers such a sinister compliment sticks with her in a way she can’t abide, fingers tightening against the razor in her hand. “Especially then.”

“Why are you telling me this?” she shoots, a frown pulling her face into more determined knots of tension, but he holds her in the same serious gaze as ever.

“So you don’t have to wonder,” he answers ominously. “It’s not a choice that can be unmade.”

Then he pauses, a crossing of something more intimate in his face. “I’m familiar with the depths of your curiosity.”

How dare you, she almost spits – how dare he talk about knowing her, much less to imply she could ever be swayed to so gruesome a cause as his. Especially when it’s as if he’s put a spyglass on her thoughts and seen the picture of him she painted with throat cut by her in a moment of impulse, see-sawing between dark and light. Like he knows it’s a struggle that even she has to endure.

Instead, she pulls her wrist out of his hand and puts her hand to his face again, grabbing him assertively by the chin and forcing it back, baring his throat to her like she’s going to prove him wrong or right by opening it up to check if he’s got blood or ash, even when she knows damn well what’s inside him. His chest rises with a sharp intake of breath but he doesn’t fight her. She comes back to wondering if it’s because he trusts her not to do it, or simply because he’d die for her.
All she does is draw the blade up the final strip of hair, then skim away a few strays.

“There,” she concludes, “it’s done.”

“About time.” Daud’s gruff but lightning fast, because she’s hardly lowered the blade than he’s kissing her so surely she unfinishes any thought she was having. Emily ends up dropping the razor somewhere over the back of the chair as she closes an arm around his neck. One of his loops round the middle of her back and pull her further onto his lap, dragging across his crotch to a sound that rises from them both.

She gets to enjoy the results of her work, no more scratchy stubble as they deep kiss and shift until they can’t be any closer without losing or at least loosening some clothing – mostly on his part. Daud’s hand charts up her thigh hopefully to that effect, but his attention stays turned towards her and just settles at the junction of her legs. She’s not wearing anything under the long shirt of his that she donned after their shower, so sighs and moves on him demonstratively. At first she’s a little offput when the touch disappears – resolved when he reaches it for the still open oil on the table by their side, dipping his fingers before returning to her. She’s assuredly wet already, but the added lubricant has her rocking onto his fingers with mouth breaking from his to hang over his shoulder, sounding out where and how it feels best.

“You’re something else,” he murmurs over the back of her neck, letting her do at least half the work most likely because he enjoys it rather than being strictly necessary.

“Not so bad yourself,” she pours back almost mindlessly, not considering what a statement it’d make out of context because she’s too occupied with breaking away into an, “Ah, there,” as he touches her just right. Yet even then it’s not quite enough, not when she can feel the shape of him under her and puzzle why he’s remaining in such discomfort when there’s such pleasure to be had. “More,” she urges with an indicative grind, and his other hand just shifts to the back of her head, holding her as she presses it into the hollow of his shoulder.

“Patience, love,” he hushes, still stroking her methodically. “You know what I want.” She twists a fistful of his shirt and doesn’t stop the roll of her hips over him, hardly registering what he’s saying so fixated is she on what they’re doing.

“What if I want you inside me?” she phrases; a calculated request to weaken his determination to do things his way, and going by the needy groan it’s working.

“Then you better come quickly.” Daud is certainly doing what he can to assist in that department, but seems a little tense if not hurried – Emily knows the effect she has on him.

“But what if I want you in me when I do?” she phrases secretively, and Daud lets out a twisted noise followed by the dropping of his hand all the way down to her rear, squeezing a grippy handful of flesh that makes her think she’s well on the way to getting what she wants.

“Then you do it,” comes out of him in such a strained almost-whisper she could miss it otherwise, but there’s no mistaking the words so she pushes up on her knees even as his hand follows her and starts fumbling with his waistband, doing only about as much as she needs to tug him free – hot and hard. She moves a half-closed fist over him and his head goes back as a sigh escapes him, finally grated relief.

Just as before, Emily reaches for the table to dip her fingers into the oil, though this time for the purpose of rubbing over a very different part of Daud’s body. He grunts and the hand holding her behind pulls tighter, bringing her chest almost to his face as she hovers over his lap,
The first liquid touch is incredible, sending something through her that’d have her sitting all the way down on him in one hurried motion if he’d only let her. Because he doesn’t, bracing her weight in his hands and only letting them meet end-to-end, fingers still working her above where they just begin to meld together.

“Daaud,” Emily whines, if she’s being honest with herself.

“I know, I know,” he purrs.

“Then why aren’t you doing anything about it?” she retorts, only for him to demonstratively roll up and push into her a fraction more. “-Faster,” she suffixes as he turns his mouth to her neck, no longer scratchy as he drags his lips to the softest point and sucks, until she’s rubbing her fingers urgently along with his and waiting for him to inch ever deeper into her.

Daud’s mouth finally turns to a smile against Emily’s as she shudders, getting close enough to taste it like air before a storm. “You know why,” he answers at last.

As much as Emily loathes the knowledge, she does; because there’s no reason to go charging straight into gratification when it’s there to be taken time over. Because making her wait and whine and grind on him until she can’t think straight is exactly what sends Daud off the deep end too. And because it’s not nearly half as fun when he doesn’t push back, whatever the game.

“Fuck,” Emily gasps as focus shifts to what’s being requested of her, chasing down one pleasure as she pushes down on the head of another. “Daud.”

“That’s right.” Daud’s hold around Emily is firm, his hand shifting away from the junction of her legs leaving Emily doing this to herself like some sleight of hand trick. Though it’s still all Daud she stretches around inch by devastating inch as he lets her down on him, so he’s going to feel when it happens. “Good girl.”

It’s not that the words trigger anything as such – the point already tipped past no return when the sounds make it past his lips – but the encouragement certainly just furthers the depths Emily plunges into. She releases like a bow and arrow, temporarily leaving her place in the world to come back to a few moments later, panting and tight around him.

Daud lifts his hand from between them to lightly brush over Emily’s lips; parting them and touching the tip of her tongue to the pads of his fingers she tastes herself and the oil, maybe even a hint of him as he probes further into her mouth.

“So are you going to fuck me now?” she puts to him ambitiously, carrying his fingertips on her lips as she issues the temptation. He answers her in unhesitant action, pushing the rest of the way into her without any more than a guttural rasp.

His hands fix on around her hips, but not before the one that drags from her mouth trails down the front of her shirt, pushing buttons and fabric apart so he can lay his face to her chest, no scratchy stubble on sensitive skin as he just about buries his face between her breasts. She loops her arms around each other, resting on his shoulders encircling his head.

He doesn’t say much – or anything, in fact – just keeps hold of her and rocks up as his breath washes one warm wave of air after another across the expanse of her chest.

“You’re… quiet,” she comments – Daud has not exactly cultivated a reputation for chatter, but even his usual concordance of sounds are more muted than usual, and for someone who’s hardly shut his mouth while they’re in bed, Daud’s quietness can’t go unpassed any longer. “Is everything
all right?” Emily doesn’t know why she asks it, because as soon as she does it feels horribly conspicuous – like it’s the absolute last question she should ask, especially if the answer is that he’s not. He makes a soft sound and wraps an arm all the way around her, hugging her to him more than holding her over him anymore.

“… feels good,” comes out of Daud quietly, and she moves a hand to run fingers through the back of his hair.

“I know,” she soothes as much as anything. When or how they took this turn into sincerity she can’t quite trace, but here they are so she just holds onto him and keeps her weight anchored surely.

They idly move for a while like this, then she pushes against the supportive belt of his arm around her back, shifting away and down until they can look at one another straight, emphasising his own movement with the flex and relaxing of her legs, still tucked either side of his lap.

For a moment she wants to know more than anything what he’s thinking; what’s behind that look framed by heavily lined eyes under the shelter of a weighty and scarred brow. His eyes themselves are clear, lighter flecks mixed in with a blueish grey that bore into her like deep-sea drilling. Then just as quickly she doesn’t want to know at all, for fear of what it could be.

There’s too many things Emily’s not even remotely ready to deal with that might be contained in such a face with a look like that, so what she does is put it out of sight – by leaning in to press her lips to his.

They’ve kissed during sex before, but never quite like this, Emily could swear as Daud turns his mouth up to hers and strokes tenderly across lip, mere hints of tongue touching upon her own. Touches that mean the same thing as the word she pretends not to hear slipping out of him when one or both of them is indisposed enough to not have to acknowledge it. As if it’s something to be dared even thinking about.

So Emily doesn’t think, just moves more insistently on him until she’s lacking in the faculty to consider much of anything. Daud’s mouth breaks from hers and is forehead pressed to her shoulderblade before long, issuing needy noises as she can tell he edges closer to coming. Pre-empting him for once, she rises up with fingers already fumbling for the oil to return to him before his hands can get in the way, determined that he’s not going to supplant her and she’ll be responsible for every part of his climax.

Daud doesn’t seem to mind at all, writhing in the chair and changing the placement of his hands only to clutch one of her breasts, a groan that originates deep in the back of his throat before making it out past the clench of his teeth.

“Faster,” he huffs, head lolling back over the edge of the chair much like before, though she’s put to a rather different task this time. She pauses for a moment to adjust her grip and make more room from the limited space to operate between them, then tears a fresh new noise out of Daud as she picks back up with a tighter grip and quicker pace, watching him with a level head for once and marvelling at the minute twitches on a face normally so fixed, mouth hanging loose as he throws himself open to her at long last.

He’s practically presenting his neck, prepared as if for this occasion alone, so she dips in to pick pinpoints along it with barely pursed lips, feeling his throat flex as he swallows and gasps under her unflagging ministrations. “Fuck, Em,” he gasps finally, so she pulls back with curiosity to watch as he comes and then stops her hand with quick fingers of his own.
There’s not much to show for it, less than she expects even, which considering it’s only been a matter of some hours since their last round of this supposes it might be all he’s got left. It makes for a more manageable clean-up if nothing else, the oil more of an issue than the off-clear spill that doesn’t even make it down her hand, but she doesn’t move right away, staying perched where she is watching as his eyes open and tilt down to her.

“Pleased with yourself,” he observes through narrow slits shuttered by heavy eyelids.

“I thought it was you I was pleasing .”

Daud just trails a sluggish palm from her thigh to the small of her back, then with a gentle tug pulls her against him, forehead coming to rest against his collarbone and letting her own eyes shut, breathing deeply as she wonders how much can be made of a few days, and just what he’s going to do with this world when she’s gone.

Chapter End Notes

So help me I'm sucker for shaving scenes, I watched quite a lot for "research" and it was great. Ngl it was a pretty gratifying scene to write - the actual shaving bit, with all the hints of what high chaos Emily could be and so on, rather than the spice. That's *always* gratifying.

This also marks the first inclusion of lube for these two and all the good it does, especially when there's a lot of sexual activity going on. The mind can be willing but the body chafes.

I'm doing another cheeky light edit which I might revisit, but what you see here is close enough to the finished article to serve as done.

Not that I expect it to be at the forefront of anyone's minds after this chapter ending, but the whole scholarly!Daud Pandyssian civilisation backstory and linguistic stuff is A+++ to write and I enjoy it just as much as the spice. Okay almost just as much.
The Fifty-Ninth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily never stops learning from, or about, Daud.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is kind of... coming from left-field or whatever in some of the content, but was borne from me getting a minor obsession with original backstory stuff I made up for Daud. Spicy smut scenes might be a reader indulgence, but getting into small details of Daud's life is definitely a huge indulgence for me as a writer. So here's to that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Without being able to account for exactly how it works, Emily could swear time stretches out around Daud. The lazy afternoon leads into dinner in a post-coital fugue too pleasant to shake off. Thomas only left this afternoon, and yet it feels like a different day to the one they started so long ago. Daud has the foresight to put on a slow-cooking tajeen, which if it had been anything else they would have been scraping the burnt remains out of the dish after such significant side-tracking, but as it is they eat and drink wine and even smoke just as the sun falls.

Fidgeting on the uncomfortable wooden benches on the terrace, Emily almost tells Daud he needs better furniture, but finds it stuck in the back of her throat. Perhaps it’s imagining the stone cold response Daud would no doubt offer, or the thought that such comforts would only be for Emily’s benefit and will have no purpose once she’s gone.

Once she’s gone, of course, is a phrase Emily tries to keep out of her head as much as possible, though it seeps in through the unsealed corners of her mind as the evening meanders like a slow-flowing river.

Forgetting that such things are chief among what they’re not supposed to be talking about, and at one point Emily decides to offer up the notion, “I suppose Thomas would have made it to the village by now.”

“Most likely,” Daud seems to be at peace, but is too perceptive by far to let slip anything merely disguised as a throwaway comment. “Something on your mind?”

“I’m just… contemplating how long it might take for Corvo to receive my letter.”

“If he does,” Daud counters.

“Of course he will.” Emily turns defensive all of a sudden. “Thomas is going to-”

“Send something, I’ve no doubt,” Daud interjects, swilling a slow-paced glass of wine with enough implication to read into all night. “But the same note you gave him?” Daud appears to consider it
further before taking a sip, only continuing when the rim leaves his lips again, a slight echo to the
cadence of his voice. “Perhaps.”

“Your confidence is so reassuring,” Emily scathes.

“It’s not you that I doubt,” Daud points out in a way that makes Emily wish he hadn’t. She knows
Daud’s faith in her is absolute, almost intimidatingly so. The extent of Daud’s devotion makes
Emily’s head spin if she thinks about it too much, which she struggles with every other moment –
it feels like.

“Perhaps your unflagging confidence in me ought to assure you that Thomas will do as instructed,”
Emily reasons, leaning her face into her hand as she spills over the table in search of a comfortable
way to rest, drumming her fingertips against the wood. “I have every faith he’ll carry the task
through.”

“Why?” Daud poses, and Emily isn’t sure she’s in the mood for a lot of philosophising.

Emily pauses for a moment before giving the plain answer such a question deserves. “Because I
told him to.”

That Daud laughs at this is inherently infuriating.

“So that’s that?” he says even more antagonisingly. Emily sucks a breath through her teeth, eyes
rolling back in her head.

“If you’d like me to elaborate,” she continues a little condescendingly. “As much… influence as
the Lord Protector may wield, it is in my name that he does so. A direct instruction of mine still
accords greater weight than Corvo’s in the hierarchy of power.” Daud looks, of course, solidly
unimpressed by this reliance on convention and status, but Emily’s not done. “But you-” she hooks
and catches Daud like a prize fish, “are the reason he’ll follow through.”

Daud brushes the back of his fingers along the newly shaven line of his jaw; an innocent act of
thought that Emily watches without even thinking about it. “What makes you say that?”

“While I may hold reason over Thomas’s head, you do so over his heart, leaving Corvo with
neither,” Emily explains with a veneer of calm, and Daud looks intensely suspicious, so she
hesitantly adds, “His enduring loyalty to you will sway him, I mean to say.”

“I know what you mean to say,” Daud comes in a little short; for a man gasping wantingly into
Emily’s hand not so long ago, he certainly hasn’t forgotten how to be abrasive. “Impractical ideals
like loyalty are exactly what I trained people like Thomas to abandon.”

Emily is even more convinced that she’s not in the mood for philosophising. “If you can’t see it
yourself then I can’t help,” she retorts. “It’s obvious, Daud. You just don’t want to see it.”

*He knows it,* she thinks as she looks at Daud across the table. But hell if he’s going to admit to
anything. Only when Emily appealed to Thomas not out of loyalty to her crown, but to Daud did
she get anywhere with the former Whaler, and if that isn’t proof enough she can’t make it any
clearer.

Daud surely knows that, but all he says is, “Let’s not talk of this.”

“Fine,” Emily concedes stiffly. “Then what shall we talk about?” The list of things *not* to mention
is far lengthier than approved subject matters by this point.
“Must we talk at all?” Daud returns, and Emily casts a look over the table at him like loaded dice. “No,” Daud rumbles forebodingly, reading the lift of her eyebrows for the implication it is. “Not like that.”

“Not like what?” she says slyly, though it’s more for the fun of teasing than a burning urge to be intimate with Daud. They’ve done almost nothing else since Thomas left, and the mind may be willing but the body bears strain.

“You’ll be the death of me,” Daud bemoans rather appropriately.

“I should hope not,” Emily says before she can think about it, surprised when she catches the words in her own ear. “And… fine,” she sighs it this time, “I won’t talk.” Setting her glass aside, Emily puts her hands flat to the table and climbs over it, crossing from one bench to the other until she’s on the same side as Daud. She’ll leave conversation behind, but only in exchange for something she’s been fighting herself to resist and won’t any longer. To touch Daud.

He grants the simple request, turning as she comes across the tabletop and shifting a leg over the bench to sit sideways on it. Daud remains upright as Emily leans back against him, the missing piece of furniture that makes being here go from uncomfortable to comforting. Emily reaches to drag her glass close and lets out a deep breath, feeling Daud’s chest sinking too against her back.

The silence holds for a minute, but when Emily starts whatever idle thought it was Daud shushes her. From anyone else Emily would surely find it rude, but from Daud it’s a gentle discouragement from filling space with words they can do without. One more lesson.

Daud communicates instead with minute movements of fingertips dancing along Emily’s arms, mouth dipping sometimes onto the top of her head, where kisses fall almost out of reflex. Emily turns herself to thinking about the days, weeks and years Daud has filled with this silence, to the point of believing that sharing it with her is more intimate than speaking.

Daud’s hands coast along the top of Emily’s arms, warm and rough against her skin. She feels his chest against her back, heart beating with a precise, rhythmic thump. Her breathing falls in time with his out of curiosity or habit, and though this place direly lacks comfortable furniture, Emily supposes Daud makes up for it.

Glasses long emptied and with one of his palms tucked under her arm to wrap comfortably against her abdomen, Emily eventually catches Daud yawning.

“Is that your way of telling me you’re ready to go bed?” she says softly.

“Depends,” he murmurs in a way that’s clearly sluggish. This is later than usual by his routine, though Emily disrupted Daud’s normal pattern last night too – and the night before that. “You gonna let me sleep?” As flattering as the notion that she can keep him up if she so wishes – and it’s very much so – Emily sighs as if exasperated.

“You should have taken a longer nap.”

“Or you a shorter one.” Daud yawns again so wide his metal teeth show, a sight Emily catches at an angle as she lolls her head back against him.

“Let’s go to bed anyway,” she concedes, setting a hand over his before sliding it away as she sits up. “I’ll read if sleep eludes me.” That all of this falls together doesn’t need mentioning; most of all
that Emily should be the accommodating one and go along with Daud’s routine, but he only nods drowsily and then gets up from behind her.

It’s under these circumstances that Emily returns to the tale of Daud’s travels through Morley, with him soon fast asleep at her side – or practically on, given the way he wraps around the edge of her. She could’ve gone to the chair but why, when Daud’s bed complete with him in it are far better options?

Emily picks up the memoir where she’d left off a few days ago, imbued with an even greater understanding of the man who put pen to paper, whose breath runs across her like shallow water in a stream.

The Siege at Cahir

After travelling far as possible under the banner of Independence, I got waylaid in the fort at Cahir with a battalion of Insurgents ordered to hold the outpost at all costs. Still in a fervour over their mirage of a martyr, victories were expected against the Empire, and I’d planned to continue my journey on the Uprising’s front lines. This fell apart when a fresh ship of Imperial soldiers landed off the coast of Fraeport and cut out a swathe of territory for the Empire, cutting supply lines across the Insurgency’s holdings.

It took a week for the Officer Commanding to conclude that the lines had been cut, by which point the men were already cut-throat and hungry. Packed together and miserable in the centuries’ old castle, my plan to slip away and enrol with the Empire’s new outpost on the other side of the battle lines became impossible. Die-hard loyalists and battle-worn, these men were desperate enough to make a meal of anything in the broadest possible terms, including a man caught trying to desert.

I was weighing up the option of slaughtering them all and declaring the fort for the Empire, when one of the men by the name of Randolph Scott first cornered me brimfull of nonsense. He’d thought my long hard stares at the men had been a shared concern for their wellbeing, and not calculation of which of them would have to die first to ensure the unit collapsed most efficiently. Scott told me he wanted to break the siege too, and had sensed my desire to do the same. The look on his face when I told him my primary concern was which of his comrades would try to cannibalise me first is a picture that remains with me to this day. The countenance of a patriot with the ground torn out from under his feet.

How Scott persuaded me into a suicide mission to reconnect the supply lines is a small mystery, save that it was a way out of the fort and I had every intention of deserting or killing him at the first opportunity. The mystery that was never solved is why I didn’t, and instead let myself be led by night through the foreign countryside by a reckless fool who believed their war couldn’t be lost, even while they were losing.

Scott was from the area, and knew the land far better than I, so without him I’d have probably stumbled into one of the tarns and drowned on the way to the way to Ballysheehan. Blinded by the dark and soaked to the knees, I let Scott lead me through the countryside by the iron grip on a forearm alone, to the outpost where he insisted the Imperialists must have cut the lines.

Scott was right, loath as I was to admit it, and by the early hours of the morning we had closed in on a barraks manned by a full unit of Imperial soldiers. I could and by all rights should have killed Scott and ditched my Independence colours with his body in the peat bog that would have made a fine grave for them both. What I did was turn out a Dunwall City Watch Special, slipping in to slit the Imperials’ throats one by one without a single one of them seeing the knife. I suspect the intimacy of such executions was too much for an honourable man like Scott, who could have been beholding a ghost when I came back to him foul-tempered and fresh with their blood. The last of
his own drained from Scott’s face at my reminder that this was surely what a diehard loyalist such as himself had wanted – the more dead Imperials the better. It was satisfying to watch him choke on how different it was from the battlefield, where his aspirations of valour sang a far prettier song.

However, I made a mistake, arguing with Scott too intensely to expect the lone guard who’d escaped my blade until he put a bayonet right through my shoulder. He would have pulled the trigger a moment later had Scott not placed his own pistol square in the man’s forehead and put a hole in him that blew out the back of his skull.

Scott had no reason to do, I had been exceptionally clear about my intentions to desert as soon as this senselessness was through, yet he guarded my life without question. In the face of my fury at such contradiction, Scott told me that giving up trying to sway me to their cause was the only thing that would guarantee it’d never happen, and as long as I was helping their cause he would aid me as any of his allies.

I wouldn’t have made it far on my own, so I had to return to the fort to be hailed as a hero, slung across the arm of the only one they deserved. One hand clamped over my shoulder, spitting as much vitriol as blood spilled from the wound I took in exchange for Scott saving my life.

Emily drops the page and turns to look at Daud; fast asleep against her side, face so rarely free of tension. Her eyes flit down to his shoulder, picking out the scar that she concludes must be the same as written about here – how many times could a person get stabbed with a bayonet in one lifetime? Not that she’d put it past him.

She keeps reading, and several pages and months pass before something entirely unexpected happens. The Daud of the past has flipped sides again, as she had no doubt he would after a minor setback like getting stabbed with a bayonet. Daud remains amoral as ever in the path he cut through an almost-war – not for lack of exacerbation on his part – when a name comes back up.

It would seem Daud has quite the memory for the details of people that he’s encountered on these travels, which took place some ten years before she was even born – or perhaps he’s just had the time to recall them – and it’s rare to see the same name more than once. So when a moniker as distinct as Randolph Scott comes back onto the hand-pressed paper, Emily goes back to be sure it’s the same mention as before, though as she reads on it becomes clear she needn’t have bothered to check.

Prisons at Tipperary

Among captured prisoners from the collapse of Tipperary was a dishevelled, wounded Randolph Scott – none too pleased for seeing me again. I don’t believe he ever expected me to leave Cahir, in spite of my repeated insistence that it was the first thing I would do over the intolerable period of my recovery. Though the words I used couldn’t have been any clearer, nor our arguments from ideological positions any more opposite, Scott seemed truly outraged by the new colours I wore when we met again – spat blood on my boot from his cell, like all he could see from where he stood was myself behind a set of bars.

The rabble he got taken in with were a foolhardy lot who were all that was left who wouldn’t surrender after it became clear Tipperary would fall to Imperial rule of law again; that their ever-radicalising cause was a lost one, and for the sake of their lives they should lay down arms. Consequently, they were for the firing squad come dawn.

I killed a handful of the prison guards, men I had become acquainted with, in order to reach Scott’s cell at the quietest point of the night shift, only to have to persuade him into departing with
me – between escape with a turncoat or the firing squad, the zealot actually had to be convinced. As if dying for a country he’d never have the way he wanted meant anything. Dead is dead, just as I would’ve been had Scott not blown a man’s head off his shoulders a split-second later than he did back in Cahir.

When he finally agreed to come with me, I chewed Scott out for his dreamer’s stubbornness all over again, and he simply asked me why I was so afraid of believing in something. He got his answer that night; I believe in staying alive, a lesson he’d do well to learn by, smuggling him out in my overcoat bearing the insignia he detested so dearly. Alive is alive, regardless of the uniform.

I led Scott to safety the way he’d once done for me, men falling in our path like withering plants. By dawn our feet touched the land he loved so much he’d be willing to die for. It was several days trek to the territories held by Scott’s side, not a word that we exchanged throughout the journey having the slightest impact on the other. He, convinced it was noble to lay down his life for a cause regardless of the flaws in those who led it, and I that a corpse bears no difference for the reasons why it came to be that way. And I of all people would know.

Once on that trip, I snapped at Scott that he ought not have come with me if he wished to die for his ideals so much. All my attempts to preserve his life – the many people I killed for him – were wasted if he couldn’t agree to give up his hopeless cause. When he wouldn’t yield, I offered to let him die for his country then and there, experienced as I was at making martyrs.

Scott told me, in a way I can remember with perfect clarity, that as long as my diabolical grab-bag of motivations meant I was helping him, I would always be his ally. So I made it easy for him, and said we were no longer allies. We fought all the more, but still we trekked over sodden countryside and slept in cold, damp ditches to make it back to the Insurgent’s Freehold – the location of which would make me a fine commission if I’d tendered the information to the right parties, but never did.

With bridges burning left, right and centre, I stayed with Scott through the last night until dawn, at sizable risk of being caught and hanged as a renegade. Only when I could stay no longer did I made my way out into the countryside to start the long journey back to Tipperary.

Emily pauses reading, letting the book fall slack over her chest and glancing back at Daud sleeping obliviously on. It doesn’t say in any such words, but she’s possessed with a maddening curiosity at the connection between Daud and the man written about here. There’s something she can’t quite make out between the lines of the entries, and even goes back to re-read the section. After scouring the pages for some explanation for why Daud deserted his newest allegiance for the sake of saving this one man’s life, Emily finds nothing to solve the puzzle.

She’s almost tempted to wake Daud up and ask, but knows exactly how well that would go down. Neither does Emily quite feel like reading on, flipping through the next few pages without finding anything of nearly as much interest. Not compared to the great shadows cast by simple words, or the fact that not once in his travels so far had Daud gone backwards, only to suddenly retrace old ground for the sake of one life. It contravenes every rule of Daud’s behaviour established thus far, telling her that there had to be something about this person to make him act that way.

Of all things, it’s words from the Outsider that come back to Emily; the deity’s pontificating on Daud’s nature, how the attraction to her wasn’t based on the physical alone, reinforced by his own words to that effect.

He needs something else, she thinks to herself, watching him sleep on her side, shadows and gold in the lamplight. By first observations it could be thought Daud and Scott didn’t get along. Except that Daud wouldn’t have done what he did, the countless lives he wasted, on account of a man
whom he truly disliked – much as they might have argued.

*And he argues with you,* comes a thought like reflex. Emily starts to consider the things Daud *did* capture in words, rather than what he didn’t. How he and Scott couldn’t be more different in their politics, something Emily would also seem to share with this figure of intrigue. She finds herself wondering if that’s what drew Daud to a person – believing in the things he doesn’t.

If Emily takes it one step further, pulls apart the lines and peels back disguised indifference from the account Daud wrote for no audience’s benefit, and pries into the days – and nights – he and Scott spent together for no other reason than Daud could not tolerate his death. If she *does* assume there was something else, perhaps something even like what’s between herself and Daud now, then she also has to consider the components that create such an attachment. The people Daud cares for, and why he cares for them – because they’re something he’s not, and perhaps can’t ever be.

Dwelling on all this to the sound of Daud’s quiet breathing across her, Emily finds herself more caught up in his complexities than ever.

Emily dreams.

It’s the same setting as ever, though she hovers as if several feet above her own position while Daud closes in on her mother under the pagoda that’s now a mausoleum. Though Emily has never – never – been able to stop it, this time when she raises her hand the mark of the Outsider is emblazoned on the back.

Emily reaches desperately for Daud before he puts his sword through the heart she feels beating like a pulse from all around. The Outsider’s mark lights up and pulls, tearing at Daud with effort that feels so real Emily cries out with the exertion, only to draw not Daud – not *all* of him – away. Something formless pours into Emily’s hand hot as fire, balling there as a husk of Daud is left to complete the gruesome task.

Because it can never be changed, an empty shell of Daud finishes the last job, hollow eyes like the Outsider himself. Cracks spread across the fragile façade of his mask-like face, spreading out from that scar like it’s the impact point that shattered him forever. It *can’t* be changed, but the energy that whirls around Emily’s hand is real, balling together until she holds something that *beats* against her palm, though she knows somehow it’s not his heart – if he even has one.

*He has a different dream in his heart* she hears in a voice that’s achingly familiar and almost forgotten, as a contraption of glass and metal twisted around flesh draws the essence she tore out of him in close.

“*So, what are you going to do with it?*” This voice is different, and more familiar, at least in recent memory. More hollow eyes.

Emily closes her hand tight, squeezing like she’s going to crush it all, extinguish Daud’s last light like a candle, but the heartbeat quickens. She feels him so near, but as something *else,* not the porcelain shell that slowly breaks apart and blows away into ash before her. Destroyed by its last act. Within the rules of the dream, Emily knows what she has left of Daud is the only thing that’s real.

Emily brings her hand to her face in the dream and breathes in, pulling the essence into her with a deep breath, flooding her system until it possesses her entirely.
*What have you done?* The voice is the heart’s, while energy runs through Emily in a way that feels like rough hands she’s come to know too well. *What have you done, child?*

Her fingers open, and are empty. Emily opens her mouth to speak.

“I don’t know,” she says. But it’s not enough. Won’t ever be. So there’s nothing else she can say but, “I’m sorry.”

Emily wakes with a terrible start, thrashing in the black night disorientated and fearful, heart racing. Daud is awake at once too, touch firm and wary at first – like containing a threat – then softens. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” she gasps, too hot and shivering at the same time. It’s not convincing. “… Just a nightmare.”

Daud’s arms are already loosely around Emily, but now they pull snug, palm spanning the side of her face as he closes her to him, lips pressing to her forehead. She breathes, feeling like that same energy from the dream thrums through her still.

“I’m sorry,” is all Daud tells her. He knows why she has them.

Yet the touch is soothing, even from the same hands that brought it all about. Emily hardly knows how she came to be here, but is sick of apologies and fresh from dreamscape she tumbled rudely out of. She turns tighter into Daud, sucking air into her chest like she’s going to breathe the soul right out of him one more time.

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**Chapter End Notes**

The Morley Uprising is inspired by the Troubles, so the places mentioned here are Irish, though Randolph Scott is just an old Hollywood actor who I know most famously for being really good live-together best "friends" with Cary Grant. Not that I'm suggesting any specific parallel there, I just think in very broad themes.

All this after I said I wasn't going to write more journal entries first-hand from Daud, but at the time I first wrote this it was absolutely 100% what I wanted so here you go. Starting a new job next week, though I should be able to keep updates going without too much trouble - worst case it'll be up at the weekend rather than Friday, but I'm pretty stuck in my ways about this now so it'd be nice to round it off with the same regularity I maintained across a bunch of jobs/countries/life events.

As always thanks for reading, hope it was enjoyable, and see you next week!
The Sixtieth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Daud enjoys himself. It’s kind of a big deal.

Chapter Notes

My new job is great, but takes up a lot more time that was previously assigned to writing. Still sticking to this story though, it's a matter of principle!

Medium grade spice warning, and warning for further examples of these damn soft feels that are becoming more significant as we approach the final leg of this story (5 more chapters including almost-finished-epilogue).

When Emily wakes, she’s not as deeply entwined with Daud as she was for much of the night. Sleep has put a small channel of space between them, as the fourth night they’ve spent together like this turns into morning. But the bed isn’t terribly spacious, so Emily only has to shuffle backwards a little before she’s slipping into Daud’s hold, something he grants either semi- or perhaps even entirely unconsciously, face to the back of her shoulder and a knee that pushes comfortably between hers.

Too comfortable, Emily manages to think through the haze, the familiar feeling of her dreams in harsh contrast to the night she spent wrapped up around the man at the heart of them, two things scraping along each other like machine parts that don’t fit together. Unlike the parts of them that do, Emily’s backside pressing snugly into the recess of Daud’s crotch as he shapes around her.

She drifts back to sleep for a time, then comes back to a waking state aware of Daud’s mouth trailing sleepy kisses along the top of her shoulder. The gentle intimacy is almost too much, and only becomes even moreso when his mouth opens and Emily feels teeth pressing gently in her flesh, a knee firmer between her legs and then touch of damp as his tongue trails over her skin. A breath rushes out of Emily as Daud’s hand closes surely around her hip, rolling into her with undisguised intention as his mouth shifts higher up her neck.

For as much as Emily should be enjoying a moment like this, relishing it for all its worth, in fact – to be woken up to Daud mouthing and pressed so needily against her – somehow all she can think about is how many more mornings like this can she snatch; how long she can stay here and not have to be anything or anyone else?

Emily arches back into Daud, signalling that he should continue. She wants to just forget – who either of them are, that she has to leave, even whether she could be carrying something a little more troubling than the flushed marks he leaves against her skin – and sighs when he squeezes a breast in his hand before trailing it down her body.

They haven’t had to say a word yet, but it’s a relief somehow. “Must we talk?” He’d asked her
yesterday, and she understands it now. It’s enough just to be here.

She adjusts her legs to grant better access between them as his hand drifts ever further south, but soon finds he’s intent to play rather than anything else. Teasing a reaction out of her. When she finally caves she turns her head over one shoulder, craning towards him where his mouth is ready and waiting, closing over hers as the rest of her body twists around to follow suit, pressed into him as his tongue probes hers with careful attention.

Daud is clearly more of a morning person than Emily, certainly the more awake of the two as he lavishes attention that she sleepily accepts, pliable and soft in his grip. So much so that she lets him put a palm behind her neck and roll her head back, fastening his mouth to her neck instead for a patchwork of kisses and light teething until she’s making quiet but very definitely audible noises right against him.

“Good morning to you too,” she eventually murmurs as he descends, clamouring closer to her breasts. It isn’t long before he’s sucking on a nipple, while a couple of fingers toy between her legs again. Daud fell asleep so quickly last night they didn’t do any more of this, but he’s clearly not possessed of much in the way of reservations about catching up this morning.

Emily’s pleasantly surprised when Daud doesn’t even stop at her chest, and with no more than a sordid glance or two has sunk all the way down the bed and laid warm, roughened hands on the ticklish skin along the inside of her legs. He guides her thighs away from each other to make room for himself between. This isn’t something he’s done for her yet, and though she hadn’t mentioned it she’d certainly noticed. She could speculate as to the reasons, but is really quite content for it to be happening now, laying back lazily and sighing to the creep of his lips up the inner line of her thigh.

Emily inhales until she could burst when Daud’s mouth finally presses against her, hands to the underside of her legs which are folded over his shoulders as he tastes her first thing in the morning; methodical in the strokes of his tongue and a controlled pressure from his jaw.

Emily wonders how much he’s done this before – maybe less than she has, and certainly not as recently. It doesn’t really matter, because the act itself isn’t what makes the most difference, she’s sure as she arches into him. Not for just anyone to pleasure her in such a way, like choosing one card from a deck without care, but for him to do so this way.

The first raw sound breaks from Emily when Daud’s lips seal against her and suck, a noisy cry followed by trailing moans as she angles into him. The implications as much as anything make her head spin, because there’s a nuance she wouldn’t even try to put real words on. Something that comes from the fact that this happened by no invitation of her own – how Daud, of his own volition and natural desire, has been naturally roused into doing this. Not just because Emily wants it – she does, of course – but because he wants to. It makes her ache for him even more.

“Daud,” she pants, hands twisting against the bedding until she can’t hold back any longer and moves one to the arch of his hairline, fingers combing his hair as he lows and locks eyes with her up the plains of her body. “I need— more.” She tugs to summon him back up to her, which he seems plenty happy to oblige.

She draws him into a hungry kiss, tasting his tongue for herself, lips closing around his lower like she’s going to lift it off him. Their foreheads press together when they pull apart to snatch breaths that’re trying to outrun each other, his weight sure and warm over her as he gets into place to anchor into her. The advantages of sleeping naked, she doesn’t quite have the mind to comment on before he’s sinking into place to the release of primal noises she muffles in his shoulder.
On reflection, it’s an absolutely fine way to wake up.

While she still can.

“So what came over you?” Emily asks languidly, face tucked against the pleasing swell of Daud’s chest, hair a little bristly but not unpleasant on her cheek. His palm brushes the back of her hair for no other reason than to touch, and his heartbeat in her ear is a steady force.

“Hm?” he murmurs, seeming to have flipped in mirror of himself in the aftermath, becoming sluggish, even sleepy one once more.

“Do I really need to say it?” Emily’s fingers dance over Daud’s stomach, pressing down through the soft pad that sits over it for the solid core underneath. A body put to good work as he fucked her boneless, soft and malleable between the sheet. She didn’t do anything more than get off, which conveniently happened to be the only things Daud wanted from her until he was himself spent.

“Just pleased you’re here,” Daud says sluggishly, and though his heartbeat ploughs on without faltering, hers feels like it could stop.

Don’t remind me, Emily thinks and almost says, yet what comes out is slightly different.

“You know I have to go,” she warns, hard-edged, like it could ever be forgotten. There’s a pause that she can’t quite diagnose the meaning of – is he in tortured contemplation, or perhaps just thinking as slow as the fingers that trail across a stretch of her back like moving through honey. If he’s even thinking about it at all, though she thinks she knows him better than that.

“I know,” Daud echoes surely, and there’s not a note in his tone that she can read. “But not today.”

Emily almost feels sick, but doesn’t react outwardly, just focuses on every square inch of them pressed together, skin-to-skin.

“No,” she concedes. “Not today.”

Daud lets out a long sigh that raises Emily up before sinking surely back down, while the drum of his heart marches steadily on.

The day passes like a slow-moving river, nothing to call them in any particular direction in any kind of hurry; coffee on the terrace in the last of the early morning ambient weather before the sun starts to take control of the land again.

Emily showers as a measure against the oncoming heat and finds Daud nearby the water pump preparing to wash clothes when she’s done – still close, even if not interacting directly. When Emily fetches some of her own things from the house in dire need of washing, Daud is perched on the end of one of the broken walls, a sturdy wooden vat between his legs rubbing sodden fabric against a long and uncommonly flat stone. Smoothed by years of use, perhaps.

“When you’re done…” Emily holds a bundle of her own clothing between her hands, but she’s wearing another of Daud’s shirts, low-collared opening dipping right down to her breastbone. Daud just lifts one of his hands and flicks fingers in invitation, letting Emily dump her things in with his
and submerging them with a pawlike sweep of a palm. “Is there anything I can do?” she offers mostly out of sensitivity of having Daud do anything as… service-based as her laundry. He might not, but she’s a hunch that he will.

“Sit,” he says simply, her stomach giving a lurch as she nevertheless finds a spot just behind him on the wall. The thought that he wants her to stay nearby bites like a stone in the bottom of her shoe, but she’s not exactly going to deny him, so settles in and stares out over the ruined walls into the views across the valley framed by the bristly evergreens that creep around the tumbledown remains of the building.

She hears the swish and rhythmic noises of fabric in water, and in spite of an instinct in her gut dissuading her from expressing any such affection, soon leans over until her cheek rests against the curve of his back.

“Now what?” she asks against the echo chamber in his chest as it fills with air, and he lifts a shirt to twist by both ends until the water is wrung out before holding it out to one side.

“Hang,” he instructs, eyes up to a line she sees strung across the more built up of the walls. Same twine he once used to rig this place from here to the void with traps, a memory that returns uninvited as Emily shakes the shirt out and flips it over the line – how things have changed. It won’t take long to dry in this heat, she considers as she returns to her former pose in its entirety, this time slumped even closer to the inadmissibly present curve of his back.

“Tell me about Randolph Scott,” she brings out of nowhere, and hears Daud stop, counting at least one beat before motion resumes as if she’s said nothing.

“And where did you come across him?” he remarks peaceably.

“Cahir,” she answers coyly, “and Tipperary.”

“Ah,” he murmurs, and wouldn’t dare contest her for any more than that. He clearly remembers well enough. “What did you want to know?”

“You didn’t look back once on a trek all the way around Morely’s most elusive and dangerous corners, yet went well out of your way retracing your footsteps to see one man alone to safety,” she lays out as she hangs it up and turns back around. His mouth is pressed thin, so she knows there’s purchase in her grip. “What was it about him that made you defy so sure a habit?”

“I liked him,” is all he says.

“How much?”

“Too much,” he answers, eyes on hers as she stands a little way from him.

“Why?”
His eyes crease, then turn back to the swirling waters his hands disappear into. “Why what?”

“Why did you like him?” A sigh escapes Daud like she’s pricking holes in him to let the air escape.

“Because I was also a fool,” he answers, and upon finding her gaze still cooking him over time elaborates in a way she can’t quite tell if it’s serious or not, “You’re a few decades too late to be jealous, Emily.”

Is that what he thought? She considers with a twisted rush – is that what it is?

“I… that wasn’t my concern,” she feigns, then picks at him again like fraying threads. “So there was something between you?”

“What does it matter?”

“It interests me,” she answers. “The… type you’re drawn to.”

“My type?” he echoes sceptically, a pitying look flying up at her from under his brows before he hands another piece of washing over. “Whatever parallels you’re of a mind to draw, I can assure you they’re of your own invention.”

“Oh?” she teases. “So you don’t have an inclination for people who quarrel with you?” She could swear he’s found their various forms of fighting rather stimulating in the past.

“No,” he scoffs. “It’s not that.”

“Really?” she says disbelievingly. “You mentioned arguing with Scott more than anything else, so if it’s not that, then what?”

“Antagonism isn’t the issue, just… conviction,” he remarks almost awkwardly. “In the face of people who hold differing beliefs and mean to impose them, to be able to hold onto your own is a rare thing.” Daud stares at her like in rapt contemplation of it. “You know your own mind – as did Scott, for all the good it did him,” he adds lowly. “I suppose that’s something you would have had in common.”

“Would have?” she focuses on.

“I assume he didn’t survive the Uprising,” Daud replies morbidly, and then a quieter murmur that she’s not sure is for her, or even him. “Damn fool.”

“So were you intimate?” Emily presses sordidly.

“Emily,” he almost scolds. There was clearly something mental between Daud and this man, but knowing Daud as she does now, the body only follows after – if at all.

“Well you didn’t write any of that down,” she counters playfully. The way he’s reacting, she thinks he must. “I’ll take your silence as a yes,” she provokes, and the wary look he gives her is comforting in a way she can’t quite describe. It’s his sincere gazes like she’s the rising sun that make her itch so imperceptibly. “You never saw him again?” she adds more tentatively, and he lifts up a piece of clothing, twists it out and flings over at her – it’s her own, she notes, no distinction being made between their things.

“No,” Daud answers with complete certainly.

“Didn’t you want to?”
“I had other things on my mind,” he replies cryptically, and Emily suspects she knows what – or who – else he means. The reason a young Daud was scouring every far-flung corner of Morley in the first place, so Emily suspects.

“More interesting relationships to pursue?” she surmises.

“That’s a word for it,” Daud murmurs unfondly.

“Was yours a long courtship?”

“What?”

“With the Outsider,” she specifies, and his face twists like the frown pulling at his lips is leashed with high tension cables to every corner of his expression. “That’s what you were doing on these travels, wasn’t it?”

“In part,” Daud answers reluctantly. No denial about her choice of words, she notes without comment.

“What were the others?” Emily shoots; aside from the gross exacerbation and fleeting affairs with patriots from the Morely Uprising. Daud fixes Emily with a look that she could twist around each wrist and tie into a knot before being hung up on the line along with all their dripping clothing.

“Full of curiosity today, aren’t you?” he puts to her, and she shifts her shoulders, head lifting a little higher.

“Is that a problem?” she baits, spring-loaded to trap him if he puts his weight on her in the wrong way.

“You shouldn’t give him the satisfaction.”

“Give who?”

“The voyeur in the void,” Daud alludes as he holds out another piece of dripping laundry. “You’ve done more than enough to fan that particular fire.”

“He’d know if we’re talking about him?”

“Oh he knows,” he murmurs in an all too tempting way. “In truth, he’s quite the narcissist.”

Emily has a verifiably terrible idea, and even so it doesn’t stop her crossing over to Daud, stepping around the washing tub and spreading her legs wide over his own as she straddles his lap, wrists crossing behind his neck.

“So what you’re saying is, the Outsider also likes to watch?” she murmurs, flipping the mood like a coin, and his hands are damp when they settle against her hips.

“You think he hasn’t been watching?” Daud turns back on her, flipping it again like she’s but a slip of metal in his dextrous fingers. Emily flushes at the thought of the penetrating, black-eyed stare on her as she’d writhed in Daud’s bed this morning with his mouth between her legs. “So why don’t you behave,” Daud slurs, leaning into her cheek and scouting along to the stretch of her neck that crops out behind her ear, “and let me finish this washing?”

“You better kiss me before he’s time to notice,” Emily jokes only in tone, because Daud still does it, mouth joining to hers with such familiarity it’s scary.
How did I end up like this? Emily asks herself as just the end of Daud’s tongue brushes hers before retreating. His mouth closes around her lower lip, tugging it between his for a moment before he draws back, sealed with a final peck that might considered chaste if Emily didn’t know better.

“Satisfactory?” Daud prompts more in joke than not, and she both desperately wants to slide closer to him, push this menial junk out of the way and situate herself in his lap in the way that makes her know without doubt how good and sure she is of Daud’s desire for her. But Emily also wants to get up and run straight for the hills, because what she can’t quite come to terms with is the power of her desire for him.

There’s an atmosphere that cuts through lunch like a hot and desperately sharp knife, two halves of Emily almost perfectly divided over every scrap of affection Daud sends her way. It’s nothing dramatic, no dropping to his knees or spinning her into passionate necking as if they’ve tumbled out of the pages of a romance novel, but things altogether smaller and yet so much larger in their intimation. The brush of Daud’s knuckles gently across her back when he wants her attention, unshown smile eyes as he looks at her, even something as trivial as the fact that he sits by her side when they set in to eat lunch and not across the table from her.

How could it make sense that now, a week after kissing her in earnest and doing plenty more over the past few days, that Emily should find her heart telling her in no uncertain terms how astutely aware of Daud’s presence is doesn’t follow a single scrap of logic she’s ever come across. To be almost nervous around him, especially when he props his head on a curled fist and watches her sideways as she tries to eat and finds her appetite almost completely decimated.

“What?” she bites tensely on the atmosphere rather than food she watched him prepare not long ago.

“Does it have to be something?” Daud rolls peacefully.

“Then why are you staring?” she says a little more unkindly than she needs to, and the furrow in his brows makes her stomach kick even worse.

“Apologies” Daud sounds like he means anything but, clever twists in his tone so Emily’s the one feeling bad about snapping as his gaze rolls away.

“No, I-” Emily moves her hand just a fraction, far enough to touch a few fingertips against the tanned stretch of Daud’s forearm, warm from the sun and his internal engine. “Didn’t mean it like that,” she finishes awkwardly.

“Better make up your mind how you did,” he mutters with careful, surely calculated reservation.

“I’m just…” she struggles, flails even, to try and put something together that’s not a complete disgrace. “Wondering.”

“About?” Daud asks simply, and Emily doesn’t know where to start. How long can she stand to stay here, where every moment such a volatile mix of wonderful and unbearable? Why Daud should look at her like he worships the ground that she walks on, and if he does, how can he stand to keep on doing it? Because doesn’t it hurt, caring about her like all his actions seem to suggest he does and knowing she has to go away?

“Well, the programme for one,” Emily’s falls into a coward’s route, which Daud permits for all of a moment. “I meant it when I said I hoped I’d covered ever-”
“Don’t speak of that,” he interjects before she can drag the reassuring structure back out of the earth. “I don’t care about the damned programme anymore.”

“Well it’s the reason I came, isn’t it?” she fires back defensively, relieved to have something to get into. “My training is-”

“What brought you, yes,” he retorts, “but not the reason you’re still here.”

He’s so right it hits her like a gut-punch, stopping her with her fingers still resting against his forearm. Like she can’t remember not to touch him when she has the chance.

“No,” she concedes quietly, wondering why this is so hard – or if she even wants to know. “I suppose not.”

“Then let it go,” Daud requests, rather than orders, Emily can tell by the way he says it. “I just want to enjoy this.” This being reflected in the hand that he lays on top of hers, still perched on his arm. Now he’s learned how.

In that moment, perhaps more than any previously, Emily realises how far Daud has come, and what trouble it could mean for them both.

Chapter End Notes

Wee waa weo weo it's the feels ambulance here to take us all away. Sorry/not sorry.

Daud's lying, he's definitely into people who argue incessantly with him, especially about ethics.

We're at smutcon 5 which means that sometimes I'll skip the actual smooshing bit (because c'mon we know how that's gonna go) just to focus on a new angle, or first instance of an act. I couldn't leave this one out, but wanted to build up to it because that's just how I roll 8) Have a great weekend everyone!
Chapter Summary

Even the watched pot boils in the end.

Chapter Notes

Work as predicted is becoming a larger demand on my time, so this chapter might not have had the intensive pre-posting editing of the others, however it might not need that... it's a pretty good one.

This is the official SPICE warning, but on top of that I'm tagging on a 'body fluids' warning that's new for spice to date, I'm sure it'll be evident when you reach it, but perhaps not for the squeamish - at the same time, I don't think it's that big a deal, so off we go I suppose!

Oh and this chapter goes out to the fans of sub!Daud who I promised were going to get another treat before the end of this story ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daud starts cooking earlier than usual, and for the way the process starts could have been baking bread, flour and water worked into a dough. Emily can’t quite work out where their afternoon went, seeming to disappear into a walk around the grounds to collect the key ingredients of their meal, the evening falling suddenly upon them like the whip of a tablecloth from under a full dining set.

She sat atop one of the walls in the garden watching Daud dig up carrots, riddled with the remembrance of doing so the time they’d flung potatoes back and forth, trading early shots while still so wary of one another. With each moment that passes she seems to wrestle more with the realisation of how things have changed, little by little, until they’re left in a place where he could set down a glass of wine and what revealed itself by evening to be a fresh pasta in front of her and be under no mistake about what and why he’s done for. A far cry from the last time Daud cooked this meal for her – under no auspices now – when Emily had broken the glass rather than raise it with him.

With each moment that passes, the more obvious it becomes how Daud cares for Emily – not just physically, or in the sense of wellbeing beyond that, but how he feels about her – caught up in those looks and careful words, the more trapped she feels by this impossible situation. Even when she was the one who took to Daud’s walls with a battering ram and wouldn’t stop until he let her in completely; now she looks out from inside and realises she had no plan for what to do when she got here.

Emily washes this and any other concern down with a glass or two of wine, thankful that her company is at least not overly disposed to conversation, though even the cool night air seems a little quieter than usual. These aren’t things to start thinking about now, when she’s already snatching time she probably shouldn’t before returning to the rest of her life. Where she’d once
been so homesick she wept, and while she does still miss Dunwall at times – like when she wants hot water – the thought of not being here anymore is something Emily can’t possibly handle without going to places she doesn’t want to go in her own head.

If I start to withdraw now, she thinks to herself, eyes on her plate and most surely not on the man opposite who prepared it for her. Perhaps it’ll be easier. Softening the blow by starting the process of pulling apart, extracting herself from the neatly tangled web of Daud and this place, like roots through cobblestones. Hers are shallow enough that if she can weaken them now, perhaps, then she’ll simply blow away rather than having to tear them out herself.

It works for all of half an hour.

“What’s wrong, Emily?” Daud pulls the question out of the air like a magician producing a card, and her heart drops.

“Nothing,” she answers falsely, lifting her eyes to him across the table. He looks the same as ever, same as he’s been since she got here; it’s just her perception that’s changed. “What could be wrong?”

“Then perhaps I was mistaken,” he feigns as if he doesn’t believe a word of it. “You seem,” pauses for a moment, choosing words like another of his cards from the pack, “distant.”

“You’d be one to talk,” she retorts, but knows that it’s not really getting her out from under that perceptive gaze. He’ll only know more surely than ever something’s off with her like this, but he’s contemplative for a moment.

“You know,” he utters thoughtfully, “you can leave if you wish.”

“What?” she blurs.

“There’s no need to stay any longer out of obligation,” he says. “If you’ve tired of this place, you’re free to leave whenever you want.” The way he puts it somehow makes it worse.

“No, that’s not- it’s not that at all,” she fumbles.

“Then what is it?” he pins, like she expects him to, and she closes her eyes as she breathes in, accepting that she can’t possibly keep denying it now.

“It’s just… how is this supposed to go?”

“Is what?”

“This,” she shoots, and then far less ambitiously, “… us.”

“Is there an us?” he says quietly, and hearing him put it like that provokes a violent reflex out of her.

“How could there be?”

“Then why did you ask?” he retorts unkindly.

“Exactly,” she snaps. “I don’t know how we’re supposed to… this thing that can’t possibly be, what happens… after?” Is what the ungainly mess of words turns into.

“After you leave?” he supplies. “What else can?”
“Stop answering all my questions with your own!” she bursts. “Are you a man or a mirror?!”

“Then what do you want me to tell you?” he continues to defy.

“What you really think,” she entreats desperately. “Not whatever it is you’re trying to draw out of me.” This is good, she tells herself – deflecting the concerns onto him, the one who should be upset.

“I think this thing that isn’t happening will be over,” Daud finally returns. “No more can come of it.”

That, she tells herself, shouldn’t hurt – not her, who knows what this is supposed to be and mean. Yet it’s her head alone that shares such sentiment, the rest of her pouring cold into her belly as she sits at the table as if screwed down.

“So that’s it?” she says quietly.

“It’s how it has to be,” he responds evenly, but it lights something in her.

“Why?” she shoots. “Why does it have to be?”

“Because you’re not coming back.” The words strike something sick in Emily’s chest, like a bubble of air between her ribs.

“Are you saying I can’t?”

“That you won’t,” Daud corrects. “I don’t plant to delude myself about that.”

“What about you?” she says eagerly. “Perhaps it would be strange for me to return here, but elsewhere-”

“No,” he interrupts. “Don’t ask me to leave, Emily.” Daud gives a deep sigh. “I… can’t.”

“You won’t,” she replies. “It’s different.”

“Negligible,” he says. “Because either way it’s not going to happen.”

There’s a tense silence, broken with the draining of a glass that she lowers from her red-stained lips.

“… Would you kill for me, Daud?” she asks on a whisper of wind that brushes across the terrace.

He looks at her with all that hidden foreboding under the surface. “I think you know the answer to that.”

“Well what good is it out here!” she bursts, throwing out an arm at the landscape around them.

“You would ask that of me?” he puts to her in a voice that washes away from her like receding waves on a shore.

“You would refuse me?”

“Perhaps,” he answers. “But don’t ask just to find out which it is.” He heaves a deep breath. “I can’t go back.”

“So you’re just going to live out your days in this embodiment of isolation, talking to an old woman
twice a year?"

“Is there a problem if I do?”

“You need-”

“You don’t know what I need!” he snaps in time with his hand coming down on the table, and if only Emily started this argument aggravated, it’s definitely not the case anymore. “Just because you’ve been here a few weeks and we’re… intimate,” he phrases rather delicately, all things considered. “Doesn’t mean you know me better than I know myself.” Daud roots her with a glare, narrowing at the eyes with a scowl on his mouth she’d almost forgotten could be just as cruel as kind to her. “Pack those presumptions with your things before you go.”

That stings, Emily is finally forced to admit, and just stares at Daud, wondering if maybe he wants her to leave sooner. If it’d make it easier when this waiting is unbearable. Slowly, like re-animating her body from the dead, she gets up from the table with a strange feeling of otherness in her limbs.

“If that’s what you really want,” she says devoid of feeling, “I can go.” To her shame, she can hear the crack in her voice at the very end from emotion that’s not supposed to be there.

“Wait.” Daud crumples the moment he reads the break in her, releasing like the dial’s been turned all the way back down and rising up just after her. “Em-” He catches her at the end of the table, intercepting her before she can walk to the kitchen door. “It’s not.” She inhales when his hand touches against her arm, and he’s softened, or maybe was just always that soft under the temper that flares like flashes in the pan. “I’m sorry, lov-” he murmurs, and as quickly as the contact is made she knocks his hand back from her.

“Don’t call me that!” she fires, and sees realisation strike his face, like he didn’t even know he’d said it while his hand recoils as if he’s no control over it.

“Shit,” he murmurs, “sorry.”

“And don’t apologise!” she belts.

“Then what would you have me do?!” he barks, and suddenly they’re back to this – yelling at each other.

“Just stop… stop doing this!” she bursts.

“Doing what?” he demands, hands thrown out wide and wild, like they’ve nowhere to go when unable to latch onto her.

“Still being so-” she chokes off, eyes darting between the hand that she knocked away so sharply and his face where the twisted sentiment manifests. “Isn’t it going to be hard?” she could almost be said to plead with him.

“Is what?” he asks, a little more tempered.

“When I… I’m not here,” she practically heaves, and if she’s asking about him then she’s not doing a particularly convincing job of it.

Daud’s breath flows like the light breeze that rocks the lanterns from the trellis, as if batted by gentle fingers. Though Emily flinches when he raises a hand to her face, at the same time she rolls into it, lets him palm her with those broad, rough hands.
“Of course,” Daud confesses in a rasp of such gentleness, surely knowing the delicacy of what he holds; tissue thin concerns projected onto him like he really is a mirror and not a man who cradles her cheek, “but-” he tilts her up to look at him square, holding her in the gaze she can’t seem to escape from as he tells her, “I know it won’t hurt less for holding back now.”

Emily stares at him for just a moment longer before the floodwaters can’t hold any longer and lifts onto her toes, jolting forward and whipping an arm around his neck to hold him steady so she can kiss him a way she’s never quite done before; the way he kisses her when she pushes his buttons. Though she’s reciprocated and given plenty of signs of affection with different characters, none such as this – the pressure release, where she’s finally tapped the valve and accepted the truth he’s laid out for her.

_Who was I trying to fool?_ She asks herself despairingly, sure he’s known the whole time what she wouldn’t admit to herself. That it’s not her concern for _him_ that’s tearing her up like this, but the dread of leaving before she wants to – that saying goodbye is going to be hard. Not just for him, but her too.

Daud kisses back like walking into a storm, one hand feeding through her hair while the other grasps her hip, letting her swallow him in the gale until they’re left wet-lipped and breathing hot over each other. She finds his hand with one of hers, plies it away from her waist and closes it tight in her fingers. Pulls gently and he follows, letting her lead him inside.

“Come with me.”

Emily takes Daud to the bedroom, of course, which he follows unquestioningly. As if a tethered lamb on its way up to the altar, ready to spill sacrificial blood in her great name.

“Over there.” Emily releases him in the direction of the bed. Daud moves like she’s got him under a spell, nothing but those searching eyes on her as she unbridles the force she’d been trying to pull the reins on so hopelessly.

He sits on the edge and it’s not long before she’s in front of him, hands resting on his shoulders as he looks up at her with a backwards tilt of his head.

“It’ll be all right,” he murmurs, and she has to stop a mouth that says such awful things like she needs to hear them, hands balling in his shirt as she practically hauls him up against open lips and tastes deep. “Em-” he might even pant against her when released, but she shakes her head and holds his jaw still with a thumb.

“You don’t have to say anything,” she says hoarsely before dipping back in, this time sinking as she bends to fold her knees either side of his legs, spread across his lap as she blindly starts pulling buttons from their fastening against his chest as it rises against her.

She finally gets fed up with the process and breaks away, impatiently waiting for his cooperation as she starts to lift and pulls the shirt over his head, throwing it to one side and pausing only a moment before doing the same with her own, pressing back into him with hot skin on skin to the cool – for now – evening air.

He makes a noise into her mouth as she levers herself further over his crotch, exerting a force on his shoulders that quickly yields as he lets her push him back on the bed, laid out like foundations under her as she moves with confidence to loosen the fastening of his waistband and pull the rest of his clothes off – naked first, for once.
Trailing a hand down Daud’s front, Emily hangs open-mouthed over the groove of a hip and breathes in the masculine scent as she closes her hand around him, already hard enough she might dare speculate what this demanding streak is doing for him. Especially given the nature of the dragged out, needy sound he makes when she licks a stripe from base to head, hint of salt on her tongue and slick touch under the fingers that follow across him.

“You want it?” she plays, and he sounds like he’s choking almost. As much as he may seem to be enjoying it, a thought rings clear enough to bring her to use the same words he has – the gratification of hearing them say so, of course, but also to check the passivity she’s capitalising on is properly willing. She’s read him wrong before.

“Yes,” he steams, and then remembering before any prompt to add the requisite, “Please,” before she’ll continue.

By the time she’s actually put her mouth around Daud he’s past the point of being verbal, unrestrained guttural moans as she sucks him until he’s making static, jerking movements under her. She holds one of his hands down to the bed and the other seems to know to follow suit, grasping emptily against the bedding as she takes him deep until he bucks and groans. She wonders how much longer she’d need to do this before he comes.

Except she’s got grander plans, so pulls back with hands hastily slipping down the last of her clothing before she returns to position over him, staring up at her with a sheen of sweat brushed over the base of his throat.

“You’re mine,” she says as he’s pushed against her and held there, rolling waves through his whole body under her like she’s finally taken control of the ship in the heart of such a storm.

“Yes,” Daud answers wantonly, eyes closing with a gasping wince that tightens his face as she lowers just a little.

“Tell me,” she demands, a hand spreading flat against his stomach, pressing into him with her weight and nails curling into the soft flesh and skin. “I want to hear you say it.”

He doesn’t answer right away, but after a reflexive clench and another inch down on him groans, and his eyes flick open to fix on hers with unhampered clarity. “I’m yours, Emily,” he admits just like she’s imagined, and only then does she drop all the way home to a toothy growl of, “Fuu-uck,” from a clenched jaw.

“Good,” she rewards, moving slowly on him, acclimatising and feeling the throb running through him. “Don’t forget it.”

“No,” comes out of him as if she’s working him like bellows. “Never.” His hands finally lift from the bed to squeeze her at the low end of her hips, fingers digging into soft flesh where she’s settled on him.

She rocks pleasingly, helped by the support of his hands as he reinforces each movement she makes; slow, like she doesn’t need to be told anymore, and just takes in the view he makes under her. Better to swallow it all now, overload while she still can, because if he’s right – and he has a terrible habit of being so – then it’ll make no difference later if she goes all or nothing now, so she’d be a fool not to go in for everything she can get of him while they’re both still here.

“How do we keep ending up like this?” she mumbles with her head tipped slightly back, stretching and flexing on him to all manner of evocative sound.
“Don’t ask me,” he comes back warmly. “This one’s on you.”

“Then I suppose I should take the lead,” she teases as if she isn’t clearly already, but it’s merely the lead-in for her to take his hand and lift it up to her head, guiding fingers through the back of her hair indicatively enough that he soon closes it into a fast-firm grip.

“Like this?” he purrs, pulling a little so her head tilts farther back, eyes sliding shut with the motion as she bends into it.

“Just like that,” she urges, lifting a little so he’s the room to shunt under her. “Don’t stop.” Hardly one to refuse such an offer, he does exactly as he’s told and drives up into her, tugging her back from the unwaverable beam of his arm as she yields to the desperately satisfying pressure. She pants as he lays into her, hands finding the top of his legs behind her as she pulls back into the hold delightingly – so that he does before she’s done is unexpected. “What’s the-”

“Ah,” comes from him in a way that’s more quizzical than carnal, and the grip in her hair relaxes, letting her look down.

“Oh,” she echoes, glancing down between them and taking in the slick of blood – like an offering’s been made after all. Not quite knowing what to do or say is a decisive factor in the fact that the comment she uses to break the air is, “… At least I’m not pregnant.” Only realising right after she’s come out with it that they’d never actually used the word in the shaded conversations about such a possibility. Even now it’s a peculiar shock to hear, from her own lips no less.

He’s watching carefully, and though it’s nothing but good news, the bloody smear over the contoured flats of his body leaves her feeling a little bashful. She’s certainly not going to apologise, but ends up asking something only marginally better.

“Do you mind?”

Daud lifts her a little with careful hands, somewhere between assessing and perhaps even curious as he drags the side of his thumb through a streak and rubs it between his fingers, then his eyes are on hers.

“Bit of blood hardly bothers me,” he says with a wicked tone, and she releases a breath she didn’t realise she was holding. “You all right?”

“Of course,” she replies. “My only concern is for the mess.” Or his daring to be squeamish, as ridiculous as it might seem on reflection. Even if it’s not the same blood he was more used to spilling in times gone past.

“Don’t worry about it,” Daud insists, then unexpectedly titillates her by wiping his fingertips clean with a sweep of his tongue before returning his hand to her waist, reaching further around her hip to spread across the small of her back, pulling her in and holding her in place as he carefully starts to turn them over.

Even though she is supposed to be calling the cues, at least ostensibly, she allows this change of position and helps him move them around without breaking contact, shifting only a little awkwardly onto her back as he hangs over her. Only he doesn’t stop there, definitely pushing the graces of what had been a far more passive remit than at the beginning as he guides her legs higher, folding until they rest against his shoulders. With her calves propped either side of his ears, he only needs to turn his face to have a mouth and teeth in the soft muscle of her legs, hips lifted high and the penetration deep as he starts to move again.
Her situation does take care of any issues that might have been otherwise presented in terms of lubrication, and though she was having a wonderful time on top, all this works just as well. Soon she’s forgetting any ounce of care she might have for the state of either of them or the bedsheets as she’s sounding into the depths of each thrust and twisting her own fingers through her hair as she seizes around him.

“Breathe, Emily,” he reminds her as she folds over even further and clenches with the highest throes of pleasure, moving a hand to stroke down from her neck to her chest and squeezing a breast as he ruts over her. She gasps, allowing release and finding that relaxing lets him hit even deeper, ragdoll soft in all the right places as she springs back against him otherwise. His eyes are closed, almost biting on her leg the way he teethes it as he runs into her, all manner of primal noise in his chest as a truly sordid thought occurs to her.

“You know what this means?” she says when he slows a little, slipping her legs off of his shoulders and folding them around his waist to pull him closer to her as she reaches for the back of his head with a hand, only stopping when he’s forehead to hers. “You can come in me,” she pitches as if it’s a choice he even needs to think about – a non-issue evidenced by the groan of her name that leaves his mouth and hand that takes a tight hold of the back of her head, holding her up to him as he resumes motion even more frantic than before.

She steps out of herself for a moment as it’s happening, committing this all to memory; the feeling of his weight over and in her. The heat of his breath, body and sweat next to her, the knowledge that it’s for her he’s so vulnerable and wanton. Dull to anything but the pleasure of coming, without hesitancy or withdrawal. Daud gives a ragged groan then sudden stop as he finishes in her with a pulse. They hold there for a moment, her hands settling either side of his face as he backs away only far enough to be guided into a kiss, and only after that do they move apart carefully enough for him to get up.

He’s a picture to make an Abbeyman go into hysterics, she thinks, stood at the bedside erect and streaked with blood and more like something to make sacrifice to old gods, the mark on his hand reminding her of his earlier comments about the voyeur in the void. She speculates as to whether he was watching this, though it’s hardly something she can do anything about now – or at all, she imagines – and as such is senseless to worry over too much. Daud would surely throw a fit if he knew how the notion almost excites her.

“I’ll get you some water,” he says very contently for a man bloodied as he is, though she can expect he’s borne far worse under less favourable circumstances. “Try not to move.”

“Yes, lov-” Emily gets part-way through what was supposed to be a wry riposte, before fingers fly conspiratorially to her mouth. She watches Daud's back after turning away, wondering if he heard.

Chapter End Notes

This is a pretty juicy chapter if I don't say so myself, and finally puts rest to the is Emily pregnant angles, though it certainly opens up the is Emily falling exactly as hard for Daud as he's fallen for her angles. The 'Daud will do anything she wants' angle isn't all that new, but this is definitely one of his top sub moments for us, how good of him.

I've tried the 'withdraw early like it'll make leaving easier' technique myself and can verify it totally blows. Doesn't work. Daud's way is better, though his absolutism and
pessimistic outlook could use some work.

Not too many chapters left now, here's to hoping I get the last bit of the epilogue done to keep to the posting schedule (jk I'm sure I will), hope everyone is well and as always thanks for reading and all the lovely wonderful support I've received for this story over the course of it's (pretty long) life.
The Sixty-Second Lesson

Chapter Summary

Emily and Daud savour the night

Chapter Notes

Busy busy but not too busy to update this story. Too busy to edit it right now but eh.

Warning for all kinds of frisky business. This is the official spicy warning, and some light dom/sub stuff so consider yourselves warned. This late in the day was when I started ticking off kinks. Try and guess if you want to play a game.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Night turns into morning. By daybreak Emily finds herself with a face pressed to the back of Daud’s neck, curled around his larger form and somehow still managing to encompass him securely. Emily wakes as Daud rolls onto his back, drowsily finding the space to slip into some new comfortable position. Tucking herself into the curve of his shoulder, Emily presses her face to Daud’s neck and breathes him in with every inhale.

Not too long now, she thinks in this new routine they’ve established, eyes shut as she runs a hand lazily across the shapes of his chest. She follows scar tissue, blind fingertips dragging across the coarse hair she can follow almost interrupted from chest down to his crotch. The soft rise and fall of his breath under her like calm seas.

“You can’t pretend to be asleep and feel me up at the same time,” he remarks in hoarse morning tones. She smiles into the cove her face is hidden in, digging fingertips into his flesh, committing the feeling of him under her to memory like writing it onto the pages of a book.

“I…” I’m going to miss this, is what she’d been about to say, yet when the words sit on the end of her tongue she pulls them back – not because they’re too much, the opposite, in fact. It’s not enough. “-think I’m going to miss you,” she confesses into the hollow of his neck, and the arm he’s wound around her pulls a little tighter.

“You shouldn’t,” he replies quietly.

Emily finally emerges into the day as she picks her head up and looks at Daud with sleepy eyes, wondering yet again just how she could have allowed herself to get into a mess like this. “When has shouldn’t ever stopped us?” she poses; a question that’s promptly answered when they each move the short way needed to bring their mouths together into a drowsy morning kiss.

You wanted this to happen, Emily reminds herself, while Daud holds her as gently as he kisses her, falling back a little to look at her square. She’d wanted him not to hold back any part of what he felt for her, good or bad, but couldn’t have foreseen how far it would go. Or what it might make bring out of her in return. She sighs and lays her face on her hand flattened across his chest. Like a
platform atop a hill from which to view him, his heartbeat a seismic echo within.

“Are you,” she starts, then pauses as she gathers herself like beads from a snapped necklace, “going to be all right?” Without me, she finishes silently in her head, still in part horrified by a chain of thought so strange as this. That she could care enough to worry for his wellbeing in her absence, like it makes any sense at all after who he is and what he’s done.

He must feel it too, because if a heart could break in a look, it’s what his face tells her at that moment. He traces the backs of folded fingers across her cheek. He’s survived and lived through worse, she must remind herself.

“Better than I was before,” he answers, and she despairs why it should feel so much like her chest is running with a spiderweb of cracks.

“I should start packing, I suppose,” she comments around the time of lunch, after easy morning lost walking the perimeter of the grounds with him, something she hadn’t actually done until now. It’s so beautiful here, she knows more and more with every moment that slips away.

“It’d be wise,” he comments, then for an echo, “I suppose.” Daud sounds neither happy nor sad, a simple statement of fact. But she knows better than to trust it as indicative of neutrality in himself.

Emily goes back upstairs to gather the rest of her things that haven’t migrated to his room already, sweltering hot and unwelcoming. It’s one place she’s no regret walking out of and closing the door behind her, though the same can’t be said for the rest of his home. She finds herself stopping still, taking deep breaths and collecting herself more often than she’d like to count, thinking and trying not to think about how these are all things she’ll never see again. So the theory runs.

This includes the sight of Daud dozing in the hammock when Emily walks out onto the terrace. Couldn’t stomach packing any longer without having to admit to herself that she might be close to tears.

“Comfortable in there?” she inquires with a cheer that’s all too deceptive, and he just gives a pleased murmur. “Think it’ll hold both of our weight?”

“Only one way to find out,” he replies without actually opening his eyes.

“Then I’m coming in,” she warns. His eyelids flutter lazily open as she begins the process of getting into the hammock while it’s already occupied. It’s both more and less difficult than when it’s empty, and Daud certainly makes some noises that would indicate discomfort before she finally manages to lay more or less on top of him, bolstered against one side of the hammock with a knee crooked across his legs. The trellis, thankfully, seems to be holding up.

“What’s the verdict?” he drones, voice echoing from in his chest and running straight through her.

“Better than expected,” she answers, walking her fingers over a stretch of his chest until she finds his heartbeat and sighs in time with his own long exhale. Surpassing expectation, like just about everything here.

“Hm,” Daud murmurs agreeably, and with the sleepy sun doing its best to put them both down for the count, she succumbs to dozing in entwined bliss. At least, as much of it as she can stand before her arm falls asleep.
Emily shifts to return the circulation and inadvertently wakes him, peering up at her through bleary eyes like he almost can’t remember who she is or what she’s doing here. Looks startlingly his age for a moment. Daud lifts a hand to cradle the back of Emily’s head, and strains to lay a kiss to her brow, then as if soothing a child settles her back down with a little more cooperation on his part this time.

“I’ve been thinking,” she says when they finally reach a pose that’s at peak level of comfort, so perfectly slotted together she feels almost weightless wrapped around him. “About… us.”

“Thought there wasn’t one of those,” he murmurs.

“Perhaps not,” she counters. “But even so, although it might not be… realistic to assume I could return here, that doesn’t mean… there are other things.”

“Such as?”

“Well… what if I… wrote?” she finally unloads the idea she’d been nurturing over packing. Something other than thinking about going back to Dunwall never to see or hear from him again.

“Wrote what?”

“A letter, you fool.”

“You’d write to me?” he surmises like he might be amused by the notion. “How?”

“Pen and paper should do the trick.”

“Emily,” he cajoles.

“Well as for the delivery, I thought Thomas could perhaps-”

“Oh he’s involved now?” Daud says a touch playfully. “You know very well he works for Corvo.”

“He’ll work for whoever pays him if he’s learned anything from you,” she counters. “Plus, I suspect he’d be amenable to coming back to visit you.” Lucky bastard.

“It’d be a risk,” Daud insists, which isn’t a denial.

“What do you think I’d be putting in these letters to you?” she poses naughtily, and a smile only goes as far as Daud’s eyes before being closed down.

“If Corvo found anything out and came for me,” he warns. “I won’t go down without a fight.”

“It won’t come to that,” she insists.

“So you say.”

“Daud,” she invokes. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but please refrain from killing my only living parent.”

“As long he doesn’t try to do me in first,” he settles morbidly. She could consider how it’s come to this all over again, suffice to say it’s been a strange but profoundly altering process.

“It won’t. Even if I have to get in the way.” Emily hangs in the silence, realising only after she’s said it that she absolutely means it.
“You don’t owe me that,” Daud says. “Or anything else, for that matter.”

“It was only an idea,” she defends meekly. “I won’t if you don’t want me to.”

“It’s not the wanting,” he gives a great sigh. “It’s the reality.”

“Which is what, exactly?”

“That once you’ve gone back Dunwall, put the crown back on and picked up the life you left behind, you’ll have little time for letters to an old man up in the hills.”

“No, Daud,” she fights, and turns up to look at him, waiting until his gaze finds hers. “This… it’s been important to me, surely you realise that?”

“That may be, but all things fade with time.” Daud seems calm, though Emily doesn’t much trust the appearance. Knows him too well. “We’ll both carry on in the ways we must.” He takes her chin in his hand with careful manoeuvring. “I’ve no doubt you’ll move on quicker than I.”

“You don’t know my mind,” she retorts, pulling her jaw from his grasp. “It was merely a suggestion, you don’t have to be so dour.”

“Then what would you have?” Daud puts to her impertinently. “I set myself to wait for some correspondence from you that may never come?”

“It will,” she forces. “I swear.”

“Don’t, Emily,” he almost pleads. “Don’t bind yourself to me with obligations you may not want to keep.”

“Stop treating me like I don’t know what I want!” she snaps, as he acknowledges her frustration a little too late.

“Sorry,” he offers, hand returning to her face to trace along her cheekbone. “I just… couldn’t bear false hope.”

“I’m not asking you for hope,” she insists. “Just tell me you’ll respond if I do it.” These were big ifs, she knew, but even this small thing – the notion that she could still reach out to him and get something back – even that was better than closing the chapter forever.

“If you write,” he speaks gently enough not to manhandle her feelings any further, “I’ll answer.”

She stretches up to kiss him proper, resting thereafter with her forehead on his own.

“I’m glad,” she breathes over his lips, hesitating before continuing to let the confession spill, “that Corvo didn’t kill you.”

“For once,” he replies, “so am I.” She ducks in to a kiss again, sure in the way she twists to be on top of him that she can feel their hearts beating against the press of torso to torso.

“There is good left for you to do in this world,” she just about whispers on him, damp breath and tongue touched with his before they part again.

He sighs, folding her flat to his chest again with a hand running soothingly up and down her back. “How can you be so-” he stalls for a moment, silence filled with the drum of his heart that she’s glad still beats, as much as it should defame her to admit it.
“So?” she prompts.

“Perfect.” She keeps her face pressed to his chest lest further movement jostle any tears from her eyes.

They go as long as possible without saying it, though it seems clear enough in the way Emily’s things draw together. Possessions collected in snatches of time that last as long as Emily can stomach them. Packing the bag she doesn’t want to haul all the way back down a hill, smuggle through a busy city and find a boat named after a dirty limerick to take her away from all this. She’d stay another week, if she could. Even another month.

But how long before I’d be ready to leave of my own volition? She considers without finding an answer. As wonderful as it is, she’s not ready for a life of isolation such as Daud’s. Not all the time, without an end. Like he’s committed himself to. Emily feels he has better things to commit to now than solitude, but as ever she’s against the odds when it comes to changing his mind.

“You should leave by lunch tomorrow, if you’re to make the city by sundown,” Daud comments like running a knife between Emily’s ribs over dinner that evening. Sits by her side, facing outwards across the terrace and into the curtain of darkness as the ground falls away.

“I suppose,” she concedes, looking at the spread of starts across the night sky over the hills. Feels his hand brush over her forearm. “I know,” she says mindlessly, putting her own hand on top of his to hold him there, thumb stroking over the back of his hand. Doesn’t register he’s said nothing, answering his touch like spoken reassurance. “Would you accompany me?”

“No.” She looks at him with a touch of hurt. “You’d drag me through streets I dread to walk then leave me there watching your back?” he poses, and she resents that he phrases it like that. Especially when he’s right. “It’s easier like this,” he soothes, and she leans over gently, resting her head on his shoulder.

“You would use the word easy,” she accuses, and feels him turn to her, mouth presses to the top of her head.

“Waiting’s the harder part of any unpleasantry,” he notes.

“Oh,” she answers with a sigh. “Is that another lesson?”

“Hm.” Daud’s fingers lift under Emily’s chin, turning her face up to his so he can claim a kiss from her lips. He moves back to study her face like he’ll write a book about it after she’s gone. She endures it, then lays her head back on his shoulder and takes a deep breath.

“It will be strange to return to the city,” she comments. “So loud.”

“Karnaca’s not so bad,” Daud says. “For a shithole.” She laughs.

“Were you there long?”

“When?”

“Ever.”

“Not too long,” he spares. “I grew up mostly around Cullero.”
“Tell me about it.”
“The city?”
“Your childhood.”
“Poor,” he answers concisely. “Difficult.”
“Why?”
“Not much favour going for the son of a witch fresh off the boat from the Pandyssian isles.”
“Your mother was a witch?”
“So they said,” he says enigmatically. “Not as far as I ever saw.”
“And your father?”
“Oh,” he murmurs pensively. “I assume she killed him while I was young.” He turns to look at her and must notice the shock she wears as easily as the dress she will have to find excuses for back in Dunwall, but will not be separated with under any circumstances. “If she did, he must have had it coming.”
“Why?”
“Same as the others,” he remarks with a shrug. “Tipped the balance of use to abuse, figured out what she was doing with all those powders and potions, raised a hand to me – any number of things.” It makes sense, really, that Daud grew up in a house of death. Had he ever had a chance to do things another way, she wonders?
“You said she wasn’t a witch.”
“It wasn’t witchcraft,” he counters. “Unless you count cleverness among the dark arts.”
“Then you’d be twice a practitioner,” she teases to elicit an amused scoff from him. “Do you know if she’s still alive?”
“Hard to say,” he hums. “The trader’s found no word among the communities scattered out that way, but those that know of her wouldn’t be like to tell.”
“You wouldn’t go to find out?”
“It’s been forty years,” he excuses. “All that way for what? A son twice a witch and many more times a murderer than she ever was.”
“At least yours might still be alive,” she issues, and there’s a deep silence that could carve them apart from each other. She considers that having a fight would be another way of making this separation more bearable, but leaving on bad terms doesn’t give her any comfort whatsoever.
“I’m sorry,” he says. Not for doing it, she thinks, but just the state of things.
“I know,” she replies, and after a long pause. “Will you ever leave?”
“Perhaps,” he answers uncertainly, then a moment later. “Perhaps not.”

Not even for me? She could say, but knows that the ‘perhaps’ rests on that already. That if not for
her there’d be no consideration at all.

“Would you get me a glass?” she asks instead. “I think I could use a drink.”

He sighs. “Agreed,”

They’re drunk by the time bed happens. Or close enough to it.

It’s not intentional, but after the wine ran out Daud produced the brandy. Which Emily graciously accepted. Anything to drag the night out just that little bit longer. Never one to be outdone, Emily matched him cup for cup until quite assuredly tipsy. This is a factor in how she came to be slid between him and the table, straddled over his lap with one of his hands up inside her shirt and the other closed tightly in her hair. Mouth to desperate mouth.

"Can’t believe how much I’m gonna miss this." He’s pulling her down onto his lap as he pushes up. Primal grip and desire stripped raw. A tug on her hair tips her head back, bringing the new stubble scratch and drag of his teeth to her neck; he’s learned all her tells by now, so even the dull ache in her abdomen falls by the wayside as he handles her just right.

“I can,” she returns breathily, and then as he pushes his crotch against hers again warns, “But I’m still—”

“Don’t care.” Pinches her nipple until she shudders. “I need to be in you.”

“Yes,” she affirms. Our last night, she thinks. Bringing her desire along a grindstone until the edge sharpens to the same ruthless point as all his blades have had.

He gives a last dry thrust against her then moves back, pulling away from her with short breath. “Get up.” He’s blunt. Single-minded, even.

She obliges. Slides off him, and gets up, pausing only to lift a glass and drain the last slug of brandy from it. He catches her when she turns for the door and tastes it off her tongue, edging her back to the door.

“Bedroom,” she slips out between frantic kisses. “Remember?” He makes a low, growling sound and pulls her in wordless accession. “Wait a moment.” She’s thoughtful enough to cross the kitchen with a slight sway in her step, making it to the counter where her business lays. Fills a jug of water and is reaching for a cloth – spare any more shirts – when she hears his voice from across the room.

“Actually,” he purrs. Then he’s suddenly behind her, a hand to the counter and the other sweeping her hair away from the back of her neck. His breath is hot on her neck.

“Something on your mind?” she teases, a pretty good idea what it is. As if she hasn’t caught the looks from him while stood at this very counter before now.

“Don’t know how many times I’ve thought about doing this,” he says behind her. The back of his fingers draw down her neck.

“Then do it.” Her breath stops when his hand flips over and presses against the top of her back, the air rushing out of her as he bends her down over the counter.

“Hands by your sides, flat,” he demands like they’re in one last stage of the programme he forgot.
She follows such excitingly direct orders, wriggling against the countertop a little. His palm strokes down her back, and though she can sense him just behind her, it’s the only point of true contact between them. “Don’t move,” he instructs.

“If I do?” she tests with a playful drum of her fingers. A shock of breath fills her when his other hand cracks against the flat of her backside. “Was that-?”

“And I’ll do it again if you don’t behave,” he warns, then the hardness – one kind of it, at least – fades a little. “That all right?” Checks, because he’s pushing again, even though she’s never wanted anything but.

“Yes Daud,” she asserts, and his palm smooths over where it smarts.

“Good girl,” he affirms, running the tip of his thumb in an arc across her flank. The touch is electric. “You’re going to have be patient.”

“What happened to wanting to be in me?” Emily whines, moving a fraction and wrenching into a different kind of moan as he smacks her again.

“Am I understood?” he poses, and she evades direct answer with a vaguely affirmative noise. The next pat on her backside is lighter, teasing, even. “I’ll ask again,” he murmurs.

“Yes Daud,” she relents obediently. “I’ll behave.”

“A likely story.” Another thwack of his palm making contact with her backside sends a red-hot jolt through her.

“What was that for?” she protests.

“I don’t need a reason,” he retorts, and moves a warm hand back over the tingle. “Do I?”

His hand moves away and Emily takes a shallow breath in anticipation. Realises how much she wants him to do it. “No, Daud.”

They’re so close now, she doesn’t have it in her to fight him. To do anything except be as malleable as clay. Give him exactly what he wants. She’ll have all the time in the world to be someone, something else again after she’s gone. And for far less pleasing purposes.

“Now you’re getting the hang of it.” His hand stills, rubbing across the fabric of her shortened trousers, then tugs her back from the counter, pulling her waist away from the edge and making room to reach under her and ply open the fastening. He slides the shorts over her hips. Black underwear lie underneath, heavier and more absorbent than her other fare, to serve their particular purpose.

“You all right down here?” He trails fingers over the crotch, calculated pressure against her that elicits a needy sound.

“Not so bad,” she replies. “Don’t suppose I have to warn you about blood. But I can-” Without thinking of it, she’s started moving a hand to expedite the underwear’s removal when his swipes playfully at the newly exposed flesh at the top of her thigh. A reprimand.

“Ahh,” he asserts scoldingly. “Hands still, love.”

She nods and presses her hand back to the counter, fingers splayed desperately against the wood. How he loves to test her like this. And her to be tested.
“Yes Daud.” She plans – as she always has – not only to meet, but exceed all his expectations.

Chapter End Notes

The return of dom!Daud. How I appreciate him.

Anyone guess spanking? I always said this was a trash ship and what good is an older male authority ship without some cheeky spanking?

Only a few chapters left now, but I have technically finished the story so no incomplete hiatuses here. Have a great weekend all!
The Sixty-Third Lesson

Chapter Notes

I almost didn't get around to posting this. so sorry for the late posting, but come rain or shine I'll get a chapter up! There's only one more chapter after this, then the epilogue and we're done! It's been such a trip.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning Emily wakes with a hangover and aching thoroughly from the waist down. And the very last thing she wants to do is get up, much less pack her things and leave. So she doesn’t, twisting herself back around Daud like she’s going to put him in knots and then falls back asleep without a further thought.

However, the next time she stirs she remembers what this day is supposed to be – what she’s supposed to do, and the thought fills her with a swirling nausea she blames on last night’s brandy. There’s a lot of things she’s going to blame on the brandy, for that matter. Like the extent of her wantonness being fucked over a countertop, hot skin from the crack of Daud’s palm with one hand fisted in her hair and another holding her by the neck. How, and what she’d said – sometimes screamed – in the heat of the moment. It was wild. Wonderful. But the last time?

What she doesn’t do is get up, and with Daud surprisingly still asleep she’s little incentive to hurry anything along. Why get up when it’s so much more pleasant in bed, and she doesn’t have to leave? Emily shoves it out of her mind, buries her face in the seam of his arm against his torso and drowns herself in his presence.

When Daud finally stirs it’s with a gurgle like a drain. “Outsider’s bare arse.” He drags a hand across his face with a portion of Emily still hanging from his arm. “Never mix wine and brandy.”

“No, you tell me,” she replies. His eyes are small and shuttered under the heavy lines of his face when she looks for them. “Hungover much?”

“Dunno why you’re smiling, Empress.” It’s supposed to be a joke, but when he says it her face drops. Too right she’s no reason to smile. Not when this is – not when it’s so close. “Em,” he softens, folded fingers coming to her cheek, then takes a deep breath and stifles a belch. “I feel awful.”

Even with what feels like tears so close to running over from the edge of her eyes, Emily still manages to laugh. “That makes two of us.” He looks at her like he knows what she means, but doesn’t dare to say it. Small mercy. “Shall I put some coffee on?”

“Good luck,” he gurgles, shifting onto his back and taking a deeper breath. “Stove’s not lit.” Of course not, she realises. She’d been under the influence too, but suspects given the evidence that she can handle her alcohol better than her bedfellow.

“But I shall be back shortly.” She lays a hand to his cheek, turning his face to hers and pressing a shallow kiss to his morning-dry mouth. It’s only half-way down the hall to the kitchen that the impulse to cry surges back up. She’s built and lit a fire, blamed the smoke for streaming from her eyes, and splashed her face with water before she returns to him. Daud is asleep again.
Well, at least he won’t push her to leave if he’s unconscious, she consoles before slipping back into bed next to him. Doesn’t even sleep, not properly. Just lays her head to him and listens to his heartbeat amid the call of birds and rustling wind outside. Sounds she tries to preserve in her memory just as they are. So she might be able to recall them for longer days and months to come.

Coffee helps. A shower would even more, but Emily waits for Daud’s slow-moving slump in that direction, not wanting to be too far from his side. She’d ridicule what she’s become were she looking on herself from mere weeks ago, but so much has changed that she can’t see anything the same way anymore. If she’s leaving this behind, every ounce of company counts, a few more moments to keep watching and learning from him.

She thinks he senses it, because he never passes comment. Is there every time she reaches for him. Somehow that’s just as bad as if he were indifferent, swatting her away like the pest she’s sure she is being. That he wordlessly grants this understanding to her makes it harder to hold back.

Although she’s supposed to be leaving today, and the sooner the better at that, it drags. She drags. Not packing the last of her things, dawdling all morning and then into the afternoon.

Daud doesn’t talk too much either. It’s weighing on him too, she knows. But thinking about anything he might be feeling would break her – the way he looks at her, words he uses can’t be much clearer without him spelling it out. Emily doesn’t wish to read him anymore.

Finally, he breaks the unaddressed silence, during a recalcitrant walk back from the shower. “Even with the quicker route, if you leave it much longer you’ll be finding your way in the dark,” he tells her in a begrudging drawl from a few paces ahead.

Isn’t that what I’m doing already? Emily asks herself as her feet suddenly won’t take her another step forward. She stops, frozen and breaking at the same time, like there isn’t enough space inside her to contain everything. She’s spent a day almost perfecting the art of holding back perilous tears that have threatened to spill her eyes at increasingly regular intervals, but now when she blinks all that goes to hell. Even with the hillside breeze, the water is hot on her face.

“Emily?” Daud knows she’s halted, and turns around for the cause of the problem. With no way to hide it, she bears all. Stands in front of him and meets his gaze with the traitorous tears rolling down her cheeks. “Oh.”

She’s done plenty of things to hurt Daud up until now, but the way this one hits him could well be the worst yet. His features twist into something despairing. He’s in front of her with two long stride. “Oh love.” Daud’s hands move to her face, coarse thumbs to brush away the hurtful reality.

Emily screws her eyes shut and another warm flush is pushed out to spill down her face. She wasn’t going to do this, she’s been telling herself for longer than she cares to admit.

“… Not today.” She’s just able to keep her voice level, though it’s small and thick with emotion.

Daud seems most concerned with the need to blot away the wet from her cheeks. Doesn’t say anything, because Emily thinks she knows what it would be. He’s as good as said it a dozen times already, but never quite directly.

“I-” A small choke cuts her off, suppressing anything that might be construed as a sob. Though she can’t stop the tears, she can limit that much. “– don’t want to go.” The sun and salt sting her eyes, so she shuts them again even knowing it’ll send another wave down her face.
Daud’s hands are rough around her face but so sure. Like they would shield her from anything. He moves in closer, face hanging over hers, until eventually his forehead is almost to hers. “You don’t have to.”

“I do,” she sniffs as his head touches her own, like he’s got to get as close as possible to tell her the things he means to say.

“I know, but…” it floats on a breath, “not today.”

For some reason, Emily is surprised by this leniency. “Really?”

“I’m certainly not going to make you.” Daud sweeps her face again. “Please, don’t cry.”

Hearing him say it just makes everything that much worse. Proves it’s real. That she, an Empress whose predecessor met her end at the end of this man’s sword could shed tears over leaving his company. This is really what it’s come to.

Emily doesn’t kiss him, this time. But she does throw herself against Daud like a cannonball against battlement walls. His defences are no more, though, so she moves to him with a desperation as she fits her face to the curve of his neck and collarbone, breathes him in as his arms close around her. Holds her, soothing her to the steady ocean waves of his breath.

“Tomorrow,” Emily repeats like forming a contract, still a little wet around the eyes but the awful moment beginning to pass. “I’ll go tomorrow.”

“Whatsoever you want,” Daud grants in a way that could make her burst into tears all over again. “Although,” The soothing rub of his hand on her back hesitates for a moment. “I don’t know how much more dragging it out my heart can take.”

*His heart.* Emily knew this, really. The signs had been there for long enough. She just didn’t want to do anything about it. “It won’t.”

His answer breaks hers yet again “Alright, love.”

Emily doesn’t cry again. Not when there’s a whole new afternoon and evening and night awarded like a gift. She spends time on Daud that would’ve never had a chance to, and thinks of that instead. What she’s gained, rather than what she’ll lose.

They have a much simpler dinner this evening, couple of dishes Daud puts little effort into making. Steer clear of wine.

She actually finishes packing her things this time, resolving that with this little extra time they’ve carved out it’ll be enough, and she’s capable of getting up in the morning and leaving before tomorrow turns into a repeat of today. Even if he hadn’t said as much, neither of them can stand nor deserve it. Waiting is the harder part, so he’s told her, and she trusts him enough to believe it must be true.

They go to bed laughably early – at least by Emily’s standards – but with the full knowledge that they can lavish in fooling around, long and slow. She’d wonder if he’s fallen asleep with a hand between her legs at points, if he didn’t keep putting clever fingers to such good work she could hardly think straight. Eventually she rides him to gratified completion, on her part at least, only to be flipped over and discover how *not done* he is with her.
It’s not quite as wild as the night before, but that’s better too, in a way. In others it’s no better at all, to feel so intimate and connected and have to know how much she will miss this – not sex alone, she can get that, with women or men or even both at once if she’s really industrious. But not with him.

This new intimacy she’s come to appreciate. Where he can hold her face between his hands and look at her like he still can’t believe all this is happening and she didn’t cut his throat the first chance she got. Stays in her longer, even after he comes, holding her lips gently to his and telling her without saying anything what he’s been telling her for days.

Emily falls asleep swearing to herself she’s going to write, and if Thomas won’t take the letters then she’ll damn well deliver them herself.

Emily thinks she dreams, but it’s not quite right somehow. The space feels too real. There are no phantoms haunting her mother’s mausoleum, the land around it broken up like a shattered mirror. The only thing she sees different is a sword laid at the stone in her memory. One she knows with deeply buried recognition, but that she’s never laid eyes on before. Not like this.

“What am I doing here?” she asks the strange space, so lucid, and then a cold brush like icy wet fingers on the back of her neck runs across her.

Best not to wake him, the voice – she knows it well now – says.

“Wake who?” She sees a glimmer up on another piece of the landmass, and lifting her marked hand, blinks across to it.

You would swallow the world if it was put into a portion small enough, Emily Kaldwin. The voice came from everywhere and nowhere. Is there anything you won’t take before being offered?

“I warn you I’m rather good at hide and seek,” she says when the lack of corporeal form starts to annoy her.

Then find me. Without a distinct source, the voice sounds like it could be coming from inside her own ear, and she resists the urge to shiver as she casts around. Though this place is familiar, the objects she sees scattered through broken space are not from her own memory.

Emily sees him standing back in the centre, at the mausoleum. Blinking back feels like being immersed in a cold bath, a shock to her senses as she takes measure of him, stood for once on the false stones, hands tucked neatly behind his back. Those terrible, fascinating black eyes.

“What does this place mean to you, Emily?” he asks without turning to her, staring instead at the rounded slab where it all took place.

“It’s… where my life changed,” she answers eventually, then amends. “Where many lives changed.”

“For better or worse?” The Outsider poses, calm like the surface of a great lake undisturbed by wind-cast waves.

“What difference does that make?” she replies. “Things are as they are, no matter what I make of them.”
“Oh.” The Outsider is unreadable in tone, so inhuman and impossible to interpret. “He’s had quite the impact on you, hasn’t he?”

She feels her mouth tighten, knowing which he is meant. “Not so much,” she tries to deny.

“You can’t see it yet,” the Outsider says. “Not all of it.” For the first time the Outsider looks right at her, and Emily feels as if the ground under their feet has never existed at all. That they’ve been poised over a great yawning void. “But you will.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Does it help?” The Outsider asks with a tilt to his head, like a bird considering its own reflection.

“What?”

“The pretence of not caring.”

“I… ’m not pretending,” she says sulkishly. “I do care.”

“More than you’re willing to admit, Empress Kaldwin,” the Outsider says like simple fact. “That ability makes Daud unique among my Marked, I have come to realise.”

“Howso?” There is something in the air there, not the salt and whale oil tinge like the bottom room of a well-travelled barge, but a shared something; almost but not quite what Emily had with Thomas.

“For all the lives he’s taken, blood spilled and empires dragged down to bare stones, Daud is powerless to change the course of history with his own hands or choices,” the Outsider begins to answer in a sonorous, almost sleepy drawl, like the lines of a roughly-written poem. “Time flows around his deeds like a rock in a stream, and whether by his own convictions or a twist of fate, he seldom impacts the grand scheme with his own actions. You could call it his curse.”

“What about me?” Emily thinks, only to realise what she says or does not here makes little difference to her company.

“You are a rare case,” he explains. “He is changed around you, then as much as now.” The Outsider catches her in a lingering look like a weighted fishing net. “That is your impact on the grand scheme.” A smile of sorts appears about his face. “One of them.”

“I expected we might speak again, but this is rather sooner than I imagined,” Emily says thoughtfully. “And certainly not to discuss who I’m… to discuss Daud.” Her gaze on him hardens. “My promise to you still stands, if you tell Corvo—”

“Fear not, dear Empress,” the Outsider lilts. “I’ve decided it is far more interesting to watch this play out as you would have it.” It’s when a few handwritten books drift past that Emily finally realises whose memories they stand in, wondering how she came to be here. “I’m surprised it took me so long to realise,” the Outsider breaks out of the silence – not peaceful, or quiet, but like a moment to breathe and catch breath before plunging back into the depths. “Three decades of watching Daud, and only now do I truly understand what he does.”

“Which is what?”

“It is not things he changes,” the Outsider says like a revelation. “But people.” The deity seems terribly amused as well as disgustingly disappointed by this breakthrough. “He affects nothing, yet is the originator of so many altered courses in their own right, the paths of people whose lives’ he’s
touched.”

Emily finds herself saying, “He’s affected the lives of those he killed.”

“Those deaths are each meaningless in their own way,” the Outsider dismisses likes it’s a personal let-down. “Bar one.” Emily doesn’t have to ask which, they’re looking right at it. “I finally understand why.”

“Then tell me, instead of performing all these sonnets,” Emily cajoles, and the Outsider – eerily enough – seems to smile.

“You are your father’s daughter quite truly.” Somehow it’s embarrassing to be pointed out. “With Daud, is not the people he has killed who have changed the course of history, but those he’s known.” It seems strange to be sharing this space, this conversation with so peculiar a companion, but Emily wonders who else would be able to have it. She wonders if it’s lonely, being what he is. This creature is more like Daud, and vice versa, than either would care to admit, she suspects. “I hadn’t considered it, something so small and…” the word comes out like it’s sour, spoiled like badly-pickled fish. “Human.”

“Daud is that, for all his faults,” Emily agrees, and then a short, painful silence later. “Why did you bring me here?”

“To ask you what happens next.” They watch her mother’s grave like anything in it could change, even though it never will.

“I don’t know,” Emily says, a sick churning inside her. “I must return to Dunwall.”

Then the Outsider gives her a look that hits like a riptide, something powerful and all-compelling in those depthless eyes. “Must you?”

“Of… of course.”

“You can try to lie to me, Emily,” the Outsider seems to advise. “It has no purpose, but you may attempt, if it helps.” He might as well have just took hold of her neck in those cold, corpse-like fingers, for how her breath stills and tongue stops moving in her mouth. “You did not ask to be born an Empress, and have accepted the title like a duty for most of your life. After all, it is not such a terrible existence.”

Emily knows – and knows that he knows, the sly whale boy playing her from across the space – she can name several ways in which she thinks being Empress is utterly terrible. However, she can also think of people whose lives have been dogged by need and hardship, and keeps her tongue trapped behind her teeth.

Besides, the Outsider seems to be enjoying this little recital. “Except now you’ve found something else, a way of life that you could want more than the crown you never asked for.”

“That’s…” she stops herself before saying not true, because it is and she has thought about it. About not having to go back to the pomp and golden manacles of her life back in Dunwall. Of being free and unknown and… “It would never work.”

“How do you know that?” The Outsider smiles, for real this time, and it feels like a mouthful of tiny fishbones on Emily’s tongue. “You haven’t asked him.”

For a moment, Emily is simply drowning. Pulled down further and further from the surface, no reason for why she sinks so fast and no chance at filling her lungs with air again. She’s gone,
sucked into a lightless depth that blots out anything else. Because she could.

The thing she doesn’t dare to consider, that she has to cloak in as thick a blanket of denial and non-consideration as her rational mind can conjure. The traitorous thought that maybe she doesn’t have to do this if she doesn’t want to.

This being her life, at least as she knows it.

“Corvo already stands as Regent in your stead,” the Outsider shores her up dangerously. “What would it cost to let him take the power he commands on your behalf?”

“I can’t do that to him, to my… to the Empire.” She gives him a look that feels more vulnerable than stern. “I care about my people.”

“Daud cares about you.”

Emily puts her hands to her ears, as if that will help. “Don’t.”

“Tell me, Empress, how many people do you think someone like Daud has loved?” This is something the Outsider asks not because he does know – Emily has the feeling he knows exactly how well and long Daud has loved – but does it to keep driving the screw in-between her joints. As if she’s to be pinned like a butterfly and put up behind glass for observation due to her numerous curiosities, like developing feelings for the assassin who killed her mother. She might turn out to be a Mad Empress after all.

Emily presses down harder on her ears, not that it makes the slightest bit of difference. “Don’t!”

A rough timber saw tears through the space, starting a shake that she feels right under her feet as well as jumping through the air. It’s a ragged, ill-tempered snarl that Emily knows all too well.

“Am I interrupting?”

The Outsider’s head tilts, examining the proprietor of the dream. He’s dressed in the clothing of times past, red coat and high collared shirt, but Emily wasn’t prepared to see him here, like this, and it chills her in ways she can’t put words to – or doesn’t want to, at least.

“Not at all, Daud,” the Outsider lilts in a soulful sea-shanty tone. “In fact, you’re right where you need to be.”

Chapter End Notes

Back by popular request: everyone's favourite piece of shit.

Really, I hadn't intended to have more Outsider in this but he went down so well previously that I ended up bringing him back in as a ringer. He's the best worst thing and I'll never be sorry.

The Outsider's theories about Daud are 1000% made up by me because by now we all know, I do what I want with this story. The dlc can bite my butt. See you all next week for the last (formal) chapter!
The Sixty-Fourth Lesson

Chapter Summary

Finally, it happens.

Chapter Notes

As if the only chapter I don't manage to get out on time is the last - there is an epilogue, so there's one more instalment to come, but this is still officially the last chapter. Sorry it's late, and all the rest.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“How did you get here?” Emily asks Daud, and he holds up his marked hand, which shines brighter than she’s ever seen before.

“Not waking the host is a poor bit of manners,” he grumbles.

“So we go to you for manners now?” Emily retorts less kindly than she ought to, trying to fight the feeling of being caught when there is nothing about this situation that she’s had any real control over.

“Who’s we?” Daud shoots back like he could put a hole through a playing card at thirty paces. He gives the Outsider a reviled look. “I told you to stay away.”

“You meant to do the same,” the Outsider replies. “So I suppose we’re both beings of broken words.”

“Yours far more broken than most.”

“But none so broken as yours, Daud.”

“Boys,” Emily intercedes, inviting a pair of disapproving looks for her term of address. Fine. Let them disapprove. “Can’t we all get along?”

“Aren’t we?” the Outsider says sickly. “The two of you have certainly forged a most impressive rapport.” There is no room for doubt about just what the voyeur is referring to, and Emily feels her face flushing a little, if not in the worst way.

“The wretched bond between us is not a door to be opened as you please,” Daud admonishes.

“Yet without you, none of this would be happening,” the Outsider replies brightly. “The Empress and I were just reflecting on that.”

“I’m sure.” Daud doesn’t even blink, jaw wired tight, not looking at Emily. “We’re done here.”

Except Emily doesn’t feel Daud really has the authority to say that here. This is all power play, and
Emily is just caught up in a game between bitter antagonists whose interactions she only further destabilises with her presence. The substanceless ground beneath her feet seems to vibrate like it’s poised to tear itself apart.

“How is it I even am here?” Emily asks suddenly, when some object drifts by that she has no knowledge of, though the mausoleum is as she knows it – but with a sword in addition since Daud’s arrival, it seems. A sword she has only seen in her mother’s stomach, and not laid across her grave. “These aren’t my dreams.”

“Mine.” Daud doesn’t need to confirm, but it comes with a grinding warning of a tone.

“And in both your minds this place is so defined,” the Outsider marvels. “You knew then, Daud, that everything would change here. But did you think about how it would be different? Who you would become when you stopped being the Knife of Dunwall?”

“Wax lyrical to someone with the time for your empty words,” Daud bowls unforgivingly at the Outsider, whose jet black eyes roll over to Emily. They share a look Daud notices, and angry energy jumps off him. “Release us.”

Humouring them, or more likely playing a much grander game, the Outsider gives Emily an unnerving, thin-lipped smile. “Farewell, Empress.” A pulse seems to run through everything, even the air or what passes for it here. “If I should still call you that.”

This is the note the Outsider leaves it on, Emily thrashing herself upright and almost clocking Daud as he does the same beside her in bed.

“Bastard.” Daud folds over his bowed legs with a weighty sigh. There’s a long pause, which Emily feels grows more conspicuous with every passing moment.

“Aren’t you going to ask what the… what he meant by that?”

“I don’t ask what he means about anything,” Daud replies gruffly, then pulls himself upright. “Let’s take a walk.”

“A walk?” Emily echoes. “Now?” It’s the middle of the night, some light from a clear moon and stars in the sky. She considers it a moment further. “I’d love to.”

The night is cool but not cold, a warm breeze caressing the hills clothed in darkness and the merest hint of starlight. Emily doesn’t need to use the shared gifts from the Outsider to find her way, and suspects they would be out of place after the peculiarity of what just happened. Awareness of Daud’s presence by her side and the faint outlines of the terrain around them are all she needs to navigate safely.

Daud heads out of the house and turns right, bearing up the hill like he knows where they’re going. He leads the way with unstated confidence, some habit that makes following him unquestionable. Emily supposes he knows these grounds just as well in the dark as light.

They come to a stop at the top of the hill. In the dark, with lights extinguished, the house disappears in the shadow of the land, and only the night sky exists. “Should we talk about what happened back there?”

“There’s nothing to say,” Daud says with a sigh, but then out of the quiet starts to bear up a little
more. “For all my… experience, each person forges their own unique bond with the Outsider.” He takes a deep breath in and out. “You must chart your own path through those treacherous waters.”

“I’m sure your experience lends advice,” Emily says, making a snap decision and sitting down. A tug on Daud’s hand brings him to do the same. “Isn’t there any wisdom you can impart?”

“Only that creature’s interest in us is of a child who pulls the legs from spiders,” Daud tells her. “There’s no humanity left.”

“You’ve done worse things than pulling legs off spiders.”

“Exactly,” Daud says in a way that strikes Emily cold all of a sudden. “So when I say there’s nothing recognisable as humanity left in that vessel, you can trust I speak from experience.”

“What happened between you?” Emily can see the wreckage, but knows not of the storm that crashed the ship.

“I was troubled when we met, and became moreso for the time we were… close,” Daud reveals cautiously. “In time I came to believe things that would rob any man of his humanity.”

“Yet you haven’t lost it.”

“It was lost,” Daud says like he’s sure, “I just fought to take it back.” Daud is quiet, warm at her side, and still like a lake surface on a windless day. Emily knows the implications. Slowly, like the settling of silt on a riverbed, she leans against him fully, head resting on his shoulder. It wasn’t so long ago they were in bed together – the part before being almost asleep and interrupted by conversations with devious deities – and that appetite is still sated. For now, though surely not for long. Certainly not to last all the way until her departure – tomorrow.

It must weigh in Daud’s mind too, because he takes a series of sighing breaths, and then like each word has been dragged through desert to reach the point of being spoken, finally starts to speak.

“Emily,” he says, “if you—” Daud stops, and Emily just squeezes his hand. He’s trying. “If you should ever need me.” He takes another of those heaving, deep-wave sighs. “What I mean, is… I would come.” After another short pause, Daud adds his catch. “If you asked.”

“Come where?”

Daud shatters her fragile composition with one word. “Anywhere.” Emily had promised herself she wasn’t going to cry again, but this takes it close. “But don’t ask unless you truly need my help.”

“What if I can take care of myself, but desire your company?”

The Daud that she knows returns in his surly, “Not good enough.”

“Then what about the other way around?” That one gets him, and though she can’t see Daud – unless she gives the Outsider an eyeful presumably – Emily feels the focus of his attention. “You said I wouldn’t return here, but… does that mean I couldn’t?”

This place isn’t silent, though it’s a silence compared to Dunwall, where the sounds of humanity clutter the air. Here it’s just the nature, the oceanic roar of wind through leaves and chirps of wildlife. He’s thinking about it, and Emily’s compelled to soften her plea. “If I felt I needed to, I mean, and not just for your… company.”

Daud shakes his head, but it’s not the rejection Emily fears at first. “You are always welcome here,
regardless of circumstance”

It’s strangely important to hear, but that’s exactly what they are, Emily can see now; regardless of circumstance. People who by every right ought not have gotten involved like this, but it’s here and it works and she can’t believe it exists – the feelings from being with a person in such an intensely knowing and deep relationship cultivated over so short a time.

Luckily it’s dark, so there’s no visual betrayal of the hot tears that water the corner of Emily’s eyes, determined not to fall. Emily entwines herself further into Daud, fitting against him facing into the endless depths of the night sky. Another moment to tuck away and take with her.

Emily heaves a sigh that could have been a sob if she let herself go. This hasn’t been the trip she expected. “I’m glad.”

“For what?”

Emily swims in the dark for the words at first, then they come to her like carried on gentle currents. “That we have this much.”

Emily feels Daud’s mouth turn against the top of her head, the kiss he lays into her hair so naturally she could never get tired of the feeling, and breathes out on the close of another memory to secretly bank for her imminently approaching departure.

But it’s not quite as hopeless as before, if no less upsetting for the difference. To know that Daud would come if she asked – if she needed it, though so help her if she called him out on a fool’s errand – is an intangible comfort. As is knowing she can come back, if she really wants to.

The problem, Emily thinks, is not going to be her lack of wanting.

The morning feels less important than it is. Emily supposes that makes sense, as it’s a morning like any other, and even follows its own short-lived routine. At dawn, Daud is awake and trying to get up, and Emily has a problem with this.

“I need to light the stove,” she hears Daud say as he continues to draw away from her in the warm haven of his bed at this time of day. “For coffee.”

Daud has her there, so Emily frowns against the pillow and is more compliant in Daud’s extraction from around her. “Come back,” she says like she needs the insurance, and in response Daud lays a kiss to her temple, a hand sweeping fondly down her back.

“Of course,” he purrs, and Emily counts his steps away, then the minutes until he returns, absence missed as soon as he leaves the room.

Daud returns after a while, but it feels like an age. “I missed you,” Emily says like she doesn’t know the utter insane irony of such a thought, but she’s past caring anymore.

So is Daud, because all he says is, “I’ll miss you.” As he gets back into bed, Daud gathers Emily in his arms with the same easy comfort, their natural fit together like some utterly cruel joke has been played on them all in making people so perfect from each other who must be so imminently parted.

It’s still Daud’s favourite and most unsociable hour of the morning, and though Emily certainly isn’t getting up, she might concede to being awake early – not to get a head start on the trek she’s
accepted she must do today, as awful as it’s going to be. But it has to happen sometime, and this almost-over hurting has Emily utterly exhausted.

Emotionally, if not physically, because that’s all working just fine. Emily has thought this time would be her last time to be intimate with Daud a few times by now, so the real last time is borne from sleepy fumbling drawn out over a long laze as the sun rises in the sky. Finally, or just in time, Emily might argue, she masters patience. Learns how to savour each movement they fit together ever more securely, until Emily’s half convinced she couldn’t leave without at least a part of Daud coming with her.

Even if she knows he won’t. Not this time, at least.

And because she’s been faced with two impossible choices, Emily has drawn her lot. She’s chosen to hope, even if it seems like madness, that this will not be the last she sees of Daud. It’s not much, but the feeling that she could send for him if she ever really needed it – that at her word, he would come – is some comfort, though it coexists alongside something so absurdly simple it’s almost a disgrace to identify it.

Emily is sad.

Not just that she’s leaving, and this unbelievable thing happening with Daud must also come to an end, but that the experience is about to be over. Even if she stays longer, it must come to an end sooner or later, and waiting is no longer the less agonising option. She has to return to her real life in Dunwall, the commitments and duties that her role requires, and also the people who know her. Who she’s missed, she tries to remind herself – but who knew her before this happened.

There are close few who Emily has faith will weather through whatever peculiar winds carry the Empress back home, but this experience with Daud has been so intensively enlightening Emily knows things will be very different back in Dunwall.

“What will you do after I’m gone?” Emily asks over coffee, lax after an easy tumble between the sheets with Daud that seems too ordinary to be the real last time. Where slow groping and the pressure of Daud’s hands around her hips escalated as it always does, and she can almost feel Daud’s arm still around her, holding Emily prone on the bed to be ground against and into one last time. Wrapped up so securely as she’d gasped and let herself be the soft, fuckable mess Daud has made of her – or they’ve made of each other, in truth – for almost a week, and couldn’t any longer.

“Tidy up,” he replies with a teasing air Emily is grateful for. She can see what he means, the casual slip of each precise component in Daud’s world that’s taken place while she’s been here. But then he adds a more sombre, “Do some thinking.” Emily pretends to herself it doesn’t hurt. If she thinks about it for too long – longer than a single moment – she knows the waterworks will start up.

“You could always come with me,” she says not because it’s something she really expects Daud to do, but just to air the possibility. This can’t be all there is, she has to believe or she’ll lose her mind in its entirety.

“Not today,” Daud replies in an ordinary way Emily thinks is trying to soothe her by even acknowledging there might be a time he would go with her. For all the trouble that would make. Perhaps it is better Daud stays here, Emily tries to convince herself; they barely managed to keep the true nature of their… relationship from Thomas, and the chance for slip-ups and being discovered is far greater in a setting inhabited by people. If Daud stays here – if this place remains
the same – then Emily feels like she could return and pick up right where they leave off. She wonders what might constitute a good enough reason to do it.

But she’s chosen to hope, rather than believe this could all be over, so she just says, “One day, perhaps.”

Daud takes a thoughtful sip of coffee, leaning back against the counter. “Perhaps.”

Finally, it happens.

Emily’s bag is a resented, ungrateful weight on her back and the sun threatens to become her worst enemy by the minute. The longer they wait, the more of this agonising almost-gone pain Emily and Daud both get to endure, so after two cups of coffee and something to eat for the journey ahead, Emily knows she has to do it now or never. And never isn’t a real possibility, so now it has to be.

Emily stands on the terrace staring up the hill, trying not to cry and hating the fact that Daud has all his usual things to work the grounds with ready, so she knows exactly what he’s going to be doing after she walks away.

“Thank you, Daud.” Though he stands in front of her without contact between them, arms distinctively crossed, Emily feels the magnetic pull between them as she has for so long she can’t imagine not feeling this attraction, even if she hadn’t known it at the time.

“The thanks should be mine,” Daud says calmly, though Emily doesn’t trust the appearance any more than she believes her own ability to keep it together right now is indicative of her being totally fine with this. “Remember your lessons.”

“I will.” The break happens, a crack that shows through first in Emily’s voice, then she steps closer – closes the only space between her and Daud – to rest her head against the firm line of his collarbone. Daud’s hand settles at the top of her neck, and holds Emily to him patiently, letting her fight back the tears until she can raise her face to his without the dam bursting. “If I write you better answer.”

“If you write,” Daud echoes back at her, “I will answer.” Then the embrace changes, Daud’s arm pulling Emily properly against him, the powerful rise of his chest as he takes a deep breath with his face slotted next to hers and says with insurmountable gentleness, “Goodbye, Emily.”

Emily can’t say it, she can’t possibly make the same words come out without breaking, so she screws her eyes shut and tightens her arms around Daud in return. “For now.”

“As you say,” Daud’s other hand comes to Emily’s cheek, then he turns to press a kiss to her temple, looking down for a moment before lapsing into a real kiss. Even the weight of Emily’s bag seems to lighten as she angles into Daud’s kiss, a true expression of the affection that’s become so real between them.

Daud’s hand remains on her cheek after they part, and Emily’s going to need to walk away soon if she’s to be successful in her attempt to leave without crying. She looks down, letting Daud keep her close and lay one last kiss on her forehead, knowing without wanting or needing to admit openly what she’s been hiding from for some time now. “Take care of yourself,” Emily says because it’s all she can bear to let out.

Daud must know, but he doesn’t try to dress it with words either. They can just know, it doesn’t
have to be said. “And you.” His thumb traces down her cheek, and Emily knows she needs to move in the next minute or she’s going to break and have to go through this all over again.

“Goodbye, Daud.” Emily takes one last breath of his presence, and then while she still can steps back.

Daud lets her go, even if Emily wishes he wouldn’t. “Farewell, love.”

Darting forward to snatch one last peck Daud’s from mouth, Emily turns and sets off up the hillside, route to the next village marked by Daud’s hand on her map, the feeling of his palm on her cheek still lingering. One blink into the glaring sun and she feels the overrun of tears down her face, breaking her own promise not to cry as she walks away.

Emily leaves Daud’s house by the same route she came up to it, much changed for the experience.

Chapter End Notes

It was always my vision for the story to end like this, but the sucker-punch intensity of the feels made me soften its permanence somewhat. I truly never expected things to turn out like this, but writing this story has been rewarding and saw me through a very transitory period of my life, and for that I’m very thankful.

See you all next week for the epilogue, and as always, thanks very much for reading.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Emily and Daud go on, in the ways they must.

Chapter Notes

And here we are, at long, *long* last.

I've said it over and over, but I'm really glad I wrote this story, and it's been a very positive experience, in large part due to the ongoing support from all of you, so thank you, and I'm sorry (ish) that it has to end. It had to be this way.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emily makes it to Karnaca after sundown, making impressive time in a relentless march down from the hills and into the heart of the city. The sun has long set by the time she gets down to the docks, shouldering and ducking through the busy streets with her head bowed, eyes turned down and feet following a pattern of someone who is not Emily Kaldwin. It doesn’t feel like she is, and that makes it easier somehow to affect the mannerisms that keep her identity preserved all the way onto the deck of a ship named the Maiden of Morley.

On the deck stands a Whaler, and in a few paces Emily changes her steps, adopts the posture of an Empress as she comes to a stop in front of him. She doesn’t wait long, and Thomas doesn’t say much.

"Ready to depart, your majesty?" The plain-faced man of the hills has been replaced by the Whaler, glassy-eyed and monotone.

Emily tells a passable lie that she doesn’t expect to be truly believed, but they all have appearances to keep up, and an Empress can’t crumble for a bit of heartache. “I’m ready to return to Dunwall.”

A nod from the Whaler, who might still have some of Thomas in him, because he leads her to a well-equipped cabin and leaves meals outside her door without asking questions. Sick to her stomach in ways she doesn’t want to diagnose, Emily wallows in feeling miserable. Turns it into a kind of enjoyment, laying on the cot with her face buried in the collar of Daud’s shirt – he let her have one to wear for the journey back, and when she pulls the collar up and curls into it she can still smell him in the fabric.

Seasickness gives way to an aching sadness in bouts, echoing in the isolation of the ever-swaying ship. Only Thomas’s brisk knocks on the door cause it to be unlocked at all, almost like back in the days of the plague vault, and a game Emily can play all too well.

Hopefully it isn’t too obvious she’s been crying when she opens the door to Thomas, something over which Emily’s found she has almost no control at all. Certain thoughts just fill her eyes with tears, and Emily begins to embrace it, reasoning that if she cries it out now, it’ll stop happening by
the time she’s back in Dunwall.

On the fourth day at sea, Daud’s mark disappears from her hand. Emily doesn’t expect it to be so upsetting, but it hits her like a fist to the gut and she’s distraught all over again. Thomas would probably understand the feeling of grief better than anyone, but Emily tries to conceal the true extent of her misery lest he get any more suspicious.

By the final days of the trip, Emily’s sadness has settled into an aching melancholy that she can function alongside. Part of her is still happy to be home, though she feels a little hollow when she finally steps back on dry land and sees the assembly laid out to meet her, headed up by one relieved-to-see-her and indiscernibly stern looking Corvo.

Emily skips formality, breaking into a run and giving her father a much-needed hug. Perhaps the tightness of her hold tells Corvo too much already, because he lifts Emily’s face, a world of concern in his expression. “Are you all right?”

Emily doesn’t shake her head as she’s tempted to, but neither does she give her father and protector the reassurance he must be seeking. She’s not all right, and can’t lie to Corvo’s face to suggest she is. “I will be.”

Corvo gives his daughter all of two hours grace period before he expects a demonstration of what she’s learned, which she is very reluctant to give.

It’s a frustration to be asked to perform, like what Emily’s learned from Daud can be boiled into a simple routine and not a life-changing set of lessons and experiences. Emily’s reactions are sharper, and she knows a few more tricks as well as those wretched drills, but those are mere mechanics of what Daud has done to her. The real change is far deeper down, in an analytical centre that ticks over even in the day to day, a voice in Emily’s head – a familiar one, one she misses – reminds her of the ways she could die to an assassin, and charts a way for her to live.

So Emily shakes her head, tells Corvo not now, and goes about this business so sorely requiring her return. It’s all still too raw to go rooting around in Daud’s lessons, the things he taught her and reactions she was programmed with so thoroughly.

Within a week Emily feels like a gunpowder keg ready to go off. Daud had been right about this city, all the people and opportunities for someone to get close enough to slip a dagger through anyone’s throat. In a way she had not noticed before, Emily feels herself assessing threats, staring at the people around her with a harder eye.

Even in the tower she feels constantly on edge, overloaded and immobile through meetings and functions between long bouts in her room. Emily realises with far greater understanding than she ever possessed while she was at the house, why Daud would only want her to ask him to come here if it was important. Like everything he taught her – only when the moment is ripe.

Corvo discovers this in a less than advantageous way, when after a solid week of his requests for Emily to spar or demonstrate some benefit of her learning are turned down, he gets a door slammed in his face. Emily can’t explain to her father why she’s likely to start crying if reminded too strongly of her training, but she can’t stand another ‘not today’ and play as if she’s simply not in the mood.

Unfortunately, being the man he is, Corvo’s solution to this problem takes effect one evening, when something sets off Emily’s senses in a very specific way. The feeling of someone being
Emily turns into the intruder with an aggressive confidence, driving them away from protected space. A dagger at the end of an arm gets twisted up to dig at the assailant’s rubbery neck with a clear surprise at having been caught. Emily locks up their arm until they give a tortured cry and the dagger falls from their fingers, which Emily catches before it hits the ground.

Emily is about to swing the presumed assassin’s knife down at their own neck when Corvo is suddenly holding her arm, spouting apologies and calls for her to stop. Once the rush of adrenaline passes, Emily recognises the Whaling mask, and realises at once the mad scheme her father invented to test her mettle in lieu of her refusal to perform on request. She doesn’t take it well.

After a terrible argument with Corvo – Emily making the point that even someone hired to merely appear as an assassin could be an assassin for another more sinister cause, and Corvo that he had no other way of knowing if she’d learned what she needed to learn – Emily locks the door to her room and sits at her desk.

Not knowing what to do at first, Emily finds herself – as she often has – thinking of Daud. She thinks of him often, the commentary he would have on a matter, lessons that might apply to situations she’s been in over the past days. Then before she knows it, Emily draws out a blank sheet of paper

Hesitating for an agonising period of time, Emily eventually throws out any attempt at artifice, and finally begins just how she’d say it – as if they were in person.

D,

You will never believe what Corvo has done – right after I thought I was going to be free of playing at pretend assassinations, not a week after my arrival in Dunwall one was arranged for me. To which end, I almost broke one of your former employee’s arms, and the technique of their training is surely slipping. As I hope you would agree, I argued to Corvo no working assassin could be trusted to only pretend at their role, regardless of how handsome a fee might be proffered for the mark’s safety in such a charade.

I told him there is money yet in the city to pay for my demise, and what greater opportunity to fool a Lord Protector than making him believe he’s being worked for? I suggested that if Corvo desires someone to test my ability, you remain the most reasonable of the unreasonable options, so he might invite you to Dunwall if he so desperately wants to see a demonstration of what I learned, but it surprisingly wasn’t a popular opinion.

Not that it would make much of a difference to anything should you agree with me or not, it’s certainly frustrating to be sent for a masterclass and then expected to recite lessons.
I hope this letter, which you insisted I could not promise to send, finds you and the house well. I hope that it has found you at all, so if you are reading this then the arrangement we discussed can be credited as a success. I miss you, but I am well in all other respects.

The only thing I must confess, is that I have found myself longing for access to your records more times than I can count since coming back to the city. I would make the trip for research purposes alone if I could – though I don’t think I can, or at least not any time soon.

In answer to the question I’m sure your furrowed brow would pose at such a notion, if I could board some kind of new-technology ship and be in the Serkonian hills in hours instead of days, you would have hosted me a handful of times already.

There much engineering talent in Karnaca these days, so the solution may come from your end of the country rather than mine – a state visit to the Southern Isles may be in the future, though I’m sure any Empress’s disappearance into the hills would be hard to lose in such a public excursion.

Emily continues in this fashion, until before she knows it she’s working on a third and then a fourth page. Eventually she has laid out everything from the most mundane to serious of considerations into a letter she hadn’t been thinking about writing until a short time ago. Emily had been putting it out of her mind in the short-term, insistent that she would write but feeling it was too soon to reach out. Wyman will be coming through the city in a few days, and will be exactly what Emily needs. She’d thought to hold off writing to Daud until after that cleansing rite was through.

Until she’d started writing.

At first it had felt like there was nothing to tell Daud, but back over the pages she poured out so naturally, Emily revises the thought. The difficulty is finding the space between nothing and everything where she can actually conclude a missive.

Eventually she finds an end, signs it ‘M’ and tries not to smudge the ink with the few uninvited tears that roll down her cheeks as if totally independent from the rest of her being – not crying, but tears. Emily leaves the letter folded and sealed in an envelope in her desk for a couple of days – just until she’s able to make contact with Thomas outside of her father’s notice. Possibly. It takes a lot of doing, but eventually he comes to her window late one evening, crouching on the sill rather than coming inside.

“Your Majesty.”

“Please don’t call me that.” Emily holds out the envelope, unmarked and sealed without insignia. “Would you be able to deliver this for me?”

“To whom?” Thomas knows, Emily’s convinced, so that he makes her define it is a pretty piece of politics.

“Our… shared mentor,” she says with careful reserve. “He swore to me that if I wrote, he would reply, so your services to facilitate such an arrangement would be much appreciated.” It’s too much jargon, but Emily is nervous – if she’s to be discovered having caught feelings anywhere, by anyone, it’s in moments like this.

“You’re asking me to go back?” Thomas asks. “Already?”

“It might be… expedited timescales, but I don’t believe you would be unwelcome.” Emily stays calm, resisting an emotional outburst that would say far too much. “I understand if you wish to
refuse the offer, though I can make it worth your while.”

“I’ll do it,” Thomas replies resolutely. “I’m just… surprised.”

Emily looks at Thomas straight, feeling, however briefly, like the person she was up in the hills again. Someone who exists outside of rank and regime, even behind the mask. “Are you?”

Thomas returns the gaze, maybe and then his hand lifts. Without saying anything more, he takes the letter from Emily’s hand, and bows his head to her, which would be frustrating if she hadn’t just gotten her way. “I will return when I have his answer.”

Emily dips her own head – not a bow as such, but nod of respect; among those who have served the same man; Thomas has greater time and rank than Emily, so a small tribute to that goes a long way. “Thank you, Thomas.”

Emily watches Thomas leave, and tries not to tear herself apart over how long she’ll be waiting – and how long she can bear to wait.

It’s almost exactly a month since Emily returned to Dunwall, and it appears on her desk one afternoon when she’s been out at a state function. Emily knows the moment she sees the handwriting. The envelope sits at her desk as if always there, quickly opened and unfolded as Emily slides in to sit. She reads with a hand pressed tightly over her mouth, lest her heart drop right off the end of her tongue, and by end tell-tale tracks of tears run over Emily’s cheeks and fingers.

Em,

In spite of all the demonstrations of your ability to circumvent my expectations, I did not expect to hear from you, or certainly not so soon. This leads me to conclude Dunwall is as rotten as ever. I am as well as someone lacking your company could be, and hope you are a great deal better – if not safer.

To your opening assertion of the Lord Protector’s foolishness: Corvo was, and remains, a fool in all matters of life and death. The fickleness of an assassin’s work is one of its foundations. On the same note – if Corvo ever happens to read this, the only thing I have to say is to be ready if intending to pay me a visit. I will be.

However, at risk of hypocrisy, and certainly not in the case of this letter ever crossing hands with someone not yourself, I would counsel you not to be too hard on Corvo. I have done far worse to others for far less, some tales of which you’re already familiar with.

Your assessment of the risks in Corvo’s scheme are just, and I have been party to many a bidding war in circumstances such as the one you described. For that reason as well as all the others, be wary of anyone I might have trained, with exception of the individual you’ve so diligently brokered into acting courier, who as I write this is taking in the last of the harvest to earn his supper.

Distraction and preoccupation during your stay has drawn out the work still to be done, so he will stay some days, and I’m not convinced I enjoy the company. I miss you. Company is a reminder of more pleasant times, and the blessings of the socialisation you seem to think me lacking in is mixed, as with most things. I am grateful for the carton of Dunwall Stripe cigarettes he brought, though the book you insisted he bring me is a far worthier gift. Thank you, for that, and much more.
I will gladly shoulder any blame I might have inadvertently taken on as a corruptor of your views on the city and its politics, though it was never my intention. I have included some other papers with thoughts on the matters you’ve included as evidence of said progress, and a lesson or two you may have missed out.

The greatest thing you have left to me is in memory. I had expected to mourn your absence as sorely as I enjoyed your presence, and this holds true, but I had not anticipated the pleasure your remembrance would bring me. There is scarcely a corner or surface of this place that you have not left some lasting mark upon, if only in the catalogue of my mind, and I have found myself dwelling on these memories with much fondness. This singularly unanticipated pleasure has somehow found means to coexist with the sorer parts of missing you, such that the ache of your absence is happily borne.

There is one gift greater than this, which persists in the face of my continued astonishment, and that is how you ever found cause to share with me what you have, or that you might still find time and inclination to reach out to me. I have no words for that gratitude, bar the continued admiration of your ability to bring an unworthy man happiness. This, with your many other abilities, remains as steadfast as ever, and I don’t believe I will ever understand what I could have done to deserve it.

Now and always,

Your man.

Chapter End Notes

I have some thoughts about separate after-story stories, soft touch that I am, but it's hard to say if they'll ever come to pass. I would like it, but it depends on my time and inclination. Without fishing for comments, they do tend to nudge me into action, so if you have some thoughts or feelings on the matter, this is the time and place to let me know. I do read all the comments even if my replies are a bit slow.

Thanks again for coming with me on this wild trip, and I wish everyone the best. It's been a pleasure.
Home for the Holidays: Xmas Special

Chapter Summary

Daud is paid an unexpected visit. He's not complaining.

Chapter Notes

Happy Holidays everyone!!! I started work on this soon after I wrapped up the main story, but it's been a long chip-away-at-it process, and with the winter/snowy themes I felt it would be a nice treat for Christmas.

Whatever you celebrate, and however you do, I hope everyone is well, and that this surprise ever-after story doesn't tug on the heartstrings too hard - or at least does it in the right way.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It has been five months, two weeks and three days, and is in the harshest depths of winter, when Daud hears unfamiliar footsteps that he dare not recognise. He reacts the same way as usual, by preparing for death, and the hell of a fight that will surely precede his when fate finally comes to take him.

But even knowing the pattern of steps that warns of the latest in a string of uninvited visitors to Daud’s home, he doesn't truly believe it until he sees her.

There was no warning of this, no indication in her last letter, which still lays upon his desk to be reread countless times, and it would be poor justice If Daud’s heart gave out just from the sight of Emily Kaldwin pacing up to the house like it – or she – is real.

This is real, or so Daud is reasonably sure, but what the Empress could be doing here beggars all belief.

What Daud wants to say from the moment he lays eyes on her, is how he's missed her every day that's passed, and loves her just as much as when she left. These things he knows without questioning, sure as the movement of tides.

But all he says is, “What are you doing here?”

Emily’s reply confirms the inherent suspicion of her unexpected presence. “I didn't know where else to go.”

It's practically dark, and a part of Daud yearns to scold her for trying to wander these unfamiliar grounds at a time like this, where winter bites as soon as the sun stops shining and being lost means the birds finding your bones. There’s a storm blowing in that could be carrying Emily in on the cusp of its freezing winds, but had it blown her elsewhere the Kingdoms might be down an Empress. The youth-blinded fool is lucky she made it, but scolding would be besides the point,
because she's here, not lost, and Daud couldn't be more glad for seeing her.

Emily’s well-worn from the journey, but there’s more trouble than that if she's here with these words in her mouth.

Daud just tells her, “‘You better come inside,’” and leaves the rest for later.

A flicker of something crosses Emily’s face, the implacable look of a course diverted, but it passes and she gives a heavy nod, eyebrows ploughed into worried furrows.

It has been three hours and Emily Kaldwin, in the flesh and not letters or memory, has covered Daud’s table in papers and unpacked a world of trouble with them. The tension in the air remains unbroken.

The difficulty Emily has found herself in far overshadows any urge Daud has to reach out for her, which he does. A long howl in his chest that is at the same time burning for and intimidated by how much he's missed her. That she could really be here, and not some figment of his memory turned wild.

The table is scattered with correspondence that’s real enough, sheaf after sheaf of notes on the political crisis that sent the Empress running. She's told him the rest in angry recollection; a faction trying to spring a soft rebellion has left the Empress Kaldwin without allies among those who would usually protect her, thinking they can turn republic as a power grab.

The treachery of a deciding majority in the parliament has triggered a constitutional crisis, leaving the head of state unable to trust the political establishment that worked so devotedly for her until now. That Emily would flee here of all places is something Daud can barely understand and can't quite believe. Why she should want to seek him out at a time like this, when trust has become the currency of choice – after everything he's done.

“Don't think I've forgotten what you told me,” Emily declares late into the evening, slumped over documents by the fireside in the kitchen, loose hair in erratic strands framing her face. If she's noticed Daud's staring, which is a given, then no comment has been made.

Daud keeps his tone wound tight, to match the feeling in his chest. “Regarding?”

“My infamy if I turned assassin,” the Empress delivers in a chilling deadpan. Daud has imagined more times than he can count how many ways this young woman could have killed him in the time they've spent together, and thinks he has a pretty good measure of how deadly she could be. What's still unfamiliar is the strength of his desire not to let that corruption make of Emily what it has of him and so many others. After all those he trained, Daud has no love for being the knife of anything, and won't sharpen new blades for this world if he can help it. They've bled enough.

“Cut weeds too little and they'll only grow back,” Daud tells her in the voice he's getting used to hearing again; his own, but softened by what he won't speak for its own sake. “Salt the earth and nothing will grow at all.”

“Then what do you propose I do?”

Daud can tell Emily's frustrated even without the pout. It’s why she snaps like a petulant student wanting to be given the right answer instead of working it out. As much as he'd love to help her, it's no help in the long run.
“Even weeds have their uses,” he tells her instead, and the way the Empress’s face screws up in dismay is almost enough to make Daud laugh, if he didn't know how sore it would make her. She's a delight in almost any mood, and even this exaggerated sulking is something he's managed to miss, along with every inch and outspoken angle of her.

Daud remembers, as he often does, how in love with Emily he still is, untempered by absence. There's no point in denying it, he's tried and it doesn't work any more than bidding the tide to stay or sun not to rise.

Nor does reminding himself she doesn't love him back, because that's never been part of the bargain and he fell for her anyway. Daud has long accepted his feelings don't pay heed to reciprocation, nor has he ever had power over who his affections fix on. Would that it could be that easy. No, Daud loves Emily for hell and high-water, and it's never more evident than when she fixes him with a wry look, peculiar smile curling lips Daud has far too many impure thoughts of.

“So what do you do with weeds?” If Daud wasn't fairly sure of Emily's waning interest in him that way – it's not like her to hold back if that's what she wanted – he could think she's flirting with him. Perhaps he's still fool enough to think there might be a chance Emily desires him anything like the way he does her, because there's a touch of warmth that seeps into his reply that doesn't come from the fire burning in the hearth. “I find a purpose for them.”

Emily is drumming her fingers against the table, and Daud wants to reach out and set his own hand over hers to still it. There's much more than that locked in his chest, but if Daud dare not reach for the hand, there’s little consideration for the rest. “So what purpose would you make for pests like these?”

“You know what happened to men like that at my hands,” Daud says like he has to remind her who he is, lest she forget only to remember with a rush of horror. Deep down, Daud still wonders how Emily could care for him, even when she's here, giving him a calculating look that knows all too well the harm he’s wrought on the world.

“Yet if you had taken more contracts I might not be in this mess now,” Emily remarks in a way that might not be entirely joking. Daud thinks of the things he’s promised this young woman; to leave here, to bloody his hands again if it meant her safety. Even dreading the thought of them, Daud knows he wouldn’t hesitate. She need only ask. He hopes she won't.

“I made many a pretty fee off this circle of backstabbers,” he comments while Emily’s fingers creep almost close enough to his to touch, then stop short.

Daud lifts his eyes to see Emily looking right at him with a spark of ingenuity. “How many of them?”

Daud casts a lazy eye across the table, and knows without needing to check, because it’s not about the individual faces – it’s the survivors left after the culling he took such a large part in over so many decades. “All of them.”

“Specifically,” Emily presses, and then her eyes light even brighter in the flickering light cast from the fire, and it’s everything Daud has not to kiss her. Only the shattering thought of mistaking her intentions and being rejected keeps him still – if she’s come to him for help, he can do that without needing to grope like a sordid old man. “Are they in your records?”

Daud picks a name, draws it along fine strands of memory to a face, and then, like so many, to a body. “Yes.”
Emily stands, and Daud knows already what she means to do and where she means to go. But when he rises a step after her, and watches the cut of her figure as she strides down the hallway towards his bedroom with such confidence – this sight he couldn’t believe he’d ever see again – Daud questions how long this torturous gift will last.

It turns out not to take very long at all. Not in this room, where there’s seldom a surface Daud doesn’t have a memory of Emily stripped bare and taking pleasure that seems stolen from some other worthier soul, rather than deserve being expended on a wretch like him.

And yet, they are barely into the books that line the shelves, pulling apart the spider web of conspiracy thread by silken thread, when Emily announces with perfect clarity and purpose, “I don't know how much longer you're going to make me wait, Daud, but if it's much longer I'm going to be displeased.”

Daud’s first thought is that he misunderstands Emily, but when he turns to look at her, shoulder pressed to his bookshelves and a sly grin that does all the wrong things to him, Daud recognises all too well.

“I didn’t think you wanted all that,” he says with a carefully hardened heart, not turning to face her lest she see the outline in his chest and know at once how much he loves her.

“I had the same thought about you, at first,” Emily replies coyly of all things, and Daud can’t understand what she's playing at. “However, I've since decided you're being stubborn as usual.”

The light twist of Daud’s temper feels severe after the absence of Emily’s particular brand of provocation for so long. He missed her in entirety, but some parts less than others. “Stubborn?” Daud echoes with a flare of incredulity. “What do you expect after turning up on my doorstep in the dark of winter with a coup in your lap?” the sharp side of Daud’s tongue moves quicker than the soft, always has, “A warm embrace and open arms?”

“Yes!” The tension breaks like thunderclap as Emily snaps back at him. “Didn’t you miss me?!?”

“Of course I did!” Daud retaliates with more bite than necessary, and only between them could a situation escalate and then derail so fast, like a train that can’t stay on the tracks. “But I understood that you came here for sanctuary and guidance, not to chase affections.”

“Can’t it be both?” Emily is back to coyness, spreading herself against the shelves in a way that screams to be held to them. Despite the doubt Daud has when his gaze lingers on the curl at the corner of Emily’s mouth, there's seldom a turn between them she's shied away from. “You know, Daud, I don’t think I believe you missed me.”

“Oh, you’d like to be convinced,” Daud concludes in a low drawl, while the locomotive driving his gut is well and truly running. How, why and still? are the prime questions in Daud’s mind, but if he’s learned one thing from Emily Kaldwin, it’s to recognise the sight of her waiting to be kissed.

He won’t make her wait any longer.

It's a slow burn, always has been, so when Daud lays a few fingertips to Emily's jaw like it's made of porcelain, she does no more than watch with those deep, dark eyes. Daud doesn't know how
passivity can take someone so forthright, so utterly insistent on claiming what she sees as her right. Which, being Empress aside, Daud has no doubt that Emily believes she deserves to everything she desires, and he's certainly not one to deny her.

So when Emily stands still waiting to be kissed, Daud knows it's for the satisfaction of drinking his desire like aged liquor, and not because she can't do it herself. Yet because Daud is a selfish, prideful man yet he only gets so close to Emily and suggests, “So you did miss me?”

Emily reaches up to close her hand around a fistful of Daud’s collar, knuckles tight but not pulling. This battle of inertia is familiar, but it's no secret that Emily has greater will to break Daud than he has to resist it. “Don't you dare tease me a moment longer, Daud.”

Daud chuckles, and then lets it happen. The first brush of lips is unpracticed, almost awkward, like familiarity has gathered dust. Then Emily's arm wraps around Daud’s shoulders and she pulls until they're pressed together wholly. The kiss deepens until it feels like they'll never draw another breath apart, til Emily is fire and desire on his tongue and Daud aches for her the way he's worked to forget and never has. This is how it comes to pass that Emily should have her legs wrapped around his waist, back to the bookshelves and the furnace that never went out burning just as fiercely.

“This,” Emily does little more than gasp over his shoulder. “I missed us.”

Daud isn't possessed of enough to even speak, more animal than man as the sensation floods through him like fast acting poison. Words are not his to speak anymore, so it's with feral noises and action he directs himself and Emily – still hanging from his waist with teeth digging into Daud's earlobe – gets them across the room from bookcase to bed. They're not quite in one piece, but will be soon enough if the way Emily pulls Daud’s shirt off is any indication.

Daud is overwhelmed with Emily's return as much as thrilled by it, and slows the pace when it comes to the attention of his fingers over the intricate fastenings of her clothes. The scorching heat of summer has been abandoned by the seasons for bitter winds and cold, so this time Emily's painstakingly tailored layers are better suited for the environment, if not a quick undressing. While Daud doesn't mind that, Emily certainly does, though not enough to take over and do it herself. She's exhausted, even through all this enthusiasm over getting into bed for other reasons. Daud knows the journey here is far from forgiving, especially if she made it from the coast in less than a day. She looks like she’s come straight from the mouth of hell itself, which Dunwall would probably put to shame.

“Daaaud.” Emily is wound tighter than Daud would give himself credit to do alone, a mean tension that's more stress than frustration. Daud runs the back of his fingers down the exposed strip of skin where the edges of Emily's shirt and waistcoat part, starting from the hollow between her breasts and trailing downward, feeling her push up into the touch. He comes to anchor off the upper shore of her waist.

“Patience,” Daud urges with a dry mouth, so struck by the sight of Emily laid out at his side he could stop here even if he didn't know what she's waiting for him to do. “You'll get there.”

Emily whips her head to one side partly in frustration and the rest for a show of defiance. “When?”

A soft chuckle slips from Daud as he bends over the bared portion of Emily's neck, whispered promise spoken against her skin as his fingers down south undo the first fastening of her trousers. “Soon.”
It's quiet when Daud wakes, a muffled silence of the outside combined with a cold in his bones that tells him snow, though it's not what woke him.

“Emily,” his voice is hoarse, eyes needing a touch of the void to pick her out on the far side of the room, up by the bookcases even though there's nothing she could make out in the dark. “Come back to bed.”

The gold of her heat and life is harsh on Daud's tired eyes, but he can make out enough to see the anxiety of her posture, arms wrapped around herself leaning into the books like they have the power alone to save her. Daud reminds himself how much less experience the precariously balanced Empress has of this world, and knows it bites no softer for the precious youth she's been able to hang onto. Under the cover of deep night, Emily is still young enough to doubt herself, even when she shouldn't because Daud has never met anyone as dedicated to pursuit of a single-minded goal as she.

Her feet make no sound as she crosses the room back towards him, and Daud shuts his eyes with a sigh as her weight settles down into the cooling space of the bed she'd left behind. “Will it work?” she asks as Daud slips an arm around her waist, guiding her back down because there's no good to come from midnight existentialism, but a decent night's sleep might help.

Slightly cold to the touch from the winter air, Emily presses into Daud for warmth in a way that will lead them astray from the path of rest if not careful. He stirs behind her but doesn't do more than press his mouth to the back of her neck. “You will make it work.”

They wake to drifts of snow shrouding the house all the way up to the first floor.

The morning is like Emily has arrived all over again, waking slow to the realisation that the warm body with just enough give in all the right places is this side of his dream-reality boundary for once. Daud is overcome with how astonished he is that Emily is here at all, expressing his appreciation the best way he knows; a hot pot of coffee and hand between her legs, at least until she unceremoniously throws him onto his back to mount.

The truth is Daud hadn't let himself to dare to hope, like acknowledging the power of his physical need for Emily would make it all the stronger. But the street may not be one way because Emily certainly seems to share the hunger that yawned in Daud’s gut like unquenched coals for so many nights.

Yesterday Emily was tired from a long trip and had a streak of passivity to prove a point on – the point being that Daud worships her no less than when she left, and the proving in what he would do given her accommodating presence in his bed. It was a point Daud made most thoroughly, but this morning with rest and a new outlook on the day, it is Emily's turn to make Daud clay in her hands. An old point of contention that Daud has long since given up resenting – that he'll do or be anything Emily wants, if only because she wants it.

There's stress yet that Emily seems determined to rut out, riding Daud hard and sure until he comes at her mercy; a gently heaving raft underneath her, chest laced with the press and scrape of her nails in the tossing surf. By the low-tide ebb of the aftermath, Emily is finally still enough to seem at peace, laying flat on top of Daud, a hand of his to trace the curve of her back. Tactile proof that she is really here.
Daud asks something he's been sorely dreading, but needs airing all the same. “Where does Corvo think you are?”

“Corvo thinks entirely too much sometimes,” comes Emily's reply. “In his battling motivations to see that I am both a fit ruler and come to no harm, he has played quite perfectly into this crisis.”

“Family and politics rarely mix,” Daud murmurs, judging the pleasing weight of Emily over his chest.

“Your lesson comes a little late,” Emily teases, rolling her head across the curve of Daud’s shoulder to look at him. Unable, and more to the point, unwilling, to stay himself, Daud bends down as Emily stretches up to kiss him. He loves her, he thinks without letting it past stiff lips. Because the simple fact of it doesn't mean he should tell her. Daud's love is no less for being kept inside.

“So what of Corvo?” he reiterates before the thread is lost entirely.

Emily sighs, meaning it may have been her plan to distract. “The men who betray me now would gladly offer Corvo a seat in their new Republic, not that I believe for a moment he would take it.” Emily pauses for a moment, and even naked spread across Daud like a fine throw, dark hair framing her face in half-curled waves, she is still every bit as regal as she would be astride a throne. Knowing how to project her power is something Daud hasn't needed to teach her. “Relying on Corvo has been half the trouble, yet he would still rather die than stop himself from helping me.”

“Even if the politician in him knows better,” Daud reasons out.

“Quite so,” Emily replies. “I told him I had to get away somewhere to gather my thoughts without the pomp and drama of court. He stays to try and council the treacherous fools, and keep the throne from being throw into the bay.”

“Still can’t believe you came here,” Daud says without thinking about it enough, offering her his heart when he means not to task her with his insecurities. “If Corvo comes looking…”

“I never told him exactly where you are,” Emily replies smugly, wriggling herself with great determination into a space between Daud’s arm and body that he makes specifically for her. “He’ll never find us.”

“Not in the snow,” Daud is inclined to agree, and then a peculiar shift takes place in Emily’s expression.

“Snow?” Emily seems perplexed, looking around as if to expect it covering the indoors too.

“See for yourself.” Daud pushes the nearest window open to a burst of icy air, half-submerged in deep drifts that the winds shoved up against the walls of this house and would need digging out when Daud could drag himself out of bed. Which wasn’t any time soon.

Emily’s face lights up, and Daud feels an ache like an old fragment stuck in a war wound for how much he loves her.

“I can’t go anywhere through snow,” that she sounds so pleased breaks Daud’s heart in another way. Fleeing her problems won’t help them, but right now Daud can’t begrudge her the desire to run away – he’s the last man to lecture anyone on that topic.

“What a shame.” If Daud were a better man he might mean that, but he doesn’t. He’s so happy
she’ll stay a while longer that it comes off perfectly insincere.

But Emily rolls up those dark eyes under darker yet lashes, hair an inky mess pouring over Daud’s arm, and smiles at him. He loves her.

Daud kisses Emily sweet and slow, refreshing the sensation and recommitting it to memory. She’s so much better in the flesh. Daud stirs with a painful throb that cuts through the post-coital bliss, wanting to be in her all over again. Instead he pulls away and takes a deep breath – there’s later, and he’s sure as hell not getting any younger. “I’ll put on another pot of coffee.”

Another thing about Emily that hasn’t changed a lick is the level of her determination to remain in bed as long as she possibly can. She’s worse than a cat, including the feral sheltering the winter in the top floor of his house. That at least mouses.

“Daud, the house is surrounded with snow,” Emily is announcing from the bed, buried in every blanket Daud has and somehow still managing to be distractingly exposed. A long and lean leg hooks around the covers, pale skin that looks like fine china next to his permanently weathered tan, like old leather. “You can’t possibly have a reason to go out and do some form of work.”

“You underestimate me,” he returns, and enjoys her playful argument just as much as the creamy stretch of thigh she keeps adjusting against the covers. Whether it’s for his benefit or not, he notices. “If the snow is left to melt and refreeze around the house there’ll be no getting out til spring.”

“What a pity,” Emily says with a ridiculous pout and no sincerity whatsoever. If it were up to him, Daud would let it happen. They’d have supplies and entertainment enough to weather through the season.

But that’s not how it has to be, because Daud has been a selfish man all his life, and finally he has learned to make choices for a greater good, and not his own. “Emily,” he reminds her who she is, and she rolls over in a mood. Pretence or real, it doesn’t matter much because she knows she has to go just as well as he does, so he won’t labour the point any further.

“If you can grace the kitchen with your presence, we might start getting somewhere,” he tempts and nags in the same sentence, because he can’t really begrudge someone he adores from doing what she pleases, but he can try and shape Emily’s desires to constructive purposes.

“To what end?” Emily poses, so Daud turns to practical measures and pushes open the nearest window, swiping a handful of the sticky-by-morning snow into a ball between his hands. Daud leaves her a sliver of time to react before he throws it, but it’s enough. Emily arches away from the flight of the snowball and it slaps into the wall at the end of the bed. Her eyes finally open, as they fill with mischievous energy. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Daud most certainly would.

Emily appears equal parts delighted and outraged by the discovery of the bathtub, when she is finally chased out of bed and into the kitchen with an array of snowballs she returns in equal measure. The outrage is harder to figure out, but Daud knows she likes to think she already knows everything there is to know about himself and this place both, so perhaps for that very reason he
likes to keep surprising her.

A bath in summer is an intolerable waste of water, so only when winter bites and there’s snow to dig out from around the house does the old metal tub that was here when Daud arrived take up its spot in front of the fireplace, packed with snow over a day as Daud – and Emily, somewhat reluctantly – set to digging the house out before it’s frozen in for the season.

By the afternoon they’ve worked up quite the sweat. Though she’s tricky and likes trying to dodge work, Daud suspects Emily does this for sport rather than out of laziness, and once she’s into the rhythm it animates her just as he’d come to know, focus and power in that form he knows so well.

By evening the bath is piping hot and ready, which Daud discovers when he comes in to discover Emily stripped and fully submerged in it already, backlit by the fireplace and looking every bit the temptation she’s been to him since he fell so devastatingly in love with her.

“I am prepared to admit,” she announces with her head lolled back, fingertips drumming the edge of the metal bath with steam spiralling from her like something ethereal, “that this exploit was worth the labour.”

“Good labour is always worthwhile,” he counters, his antagonistic position perhaps compromised by the slow unbuttoning of his shirt, soon to be followed by the rest of his clothes. Emily smiles in acknowledgement of the intention to join her, which doesn’t need saying for being so obvious as something they will enjoy together. His old bones will benefit from a hot soak, and it will suit Emily’s disposition to fit herself into the negative space around Daud at every opportunity.

Daud settles in with Emily at his front, leaning back against his chest with the long inky slick of her hair pasted across his skin like she’s in the process of melting. They don’t talk for a long time, being silent together more meaningful than empty talk that doesn’t say the thing that burns deep inside him still.

But then, hiding what’s in his heart from Emily has never been Daud’s talent. So the conversation goes like this.

“Do you love me, Daud?”

He doesn’t stir, and keeps looking over her shoulder at the tangle of their limbs under the still surface of the water. “I think you know that answer.”

“Then tell me.”

“I love you, Emily.” Ripples shake the surface of the bath from subtle motions underwater. “Are you happy?”

Emily turns to look at him, the surface of the water shaking apart so the firelight breaks up into shots of gold and orange, with heartbreak and water in her eyes. “No.”

Daud takes a long, deep breath. This conversation, painful as it is, was inevitable from the moment she walked up. For when Emily arrives, then so too must she leave. “What would you have me do, come with you to Dunwall and be kept like a secret, caged in the tower for your pleasure?”

She stirs and settles like a bluster of snowfall, coming to rest against him with a sigh. “You don't want to return to Dunwall.”

“No.”
“And I must.”

“Yes.”

“So this is the way it has to be.”

Daud strokes wet fingers across her shoulder, then pushes back a calligraphic sweep of hair cutting across her cheek. “If I thought it would make either of us happy then I would give it more consideration, but I have every faith we would both end up miserable and you would be sick of me in a fortnight.” He believes it, knowing that city would make a beast of him in no time at all.

“No, Daud, you… I care for you too, can’t you see that?”

“And you will care for others.” Her life is just beginning, and as wonderful as this thing between them is, Daud is no longer so arrogant as to presume he would eclipse all others in Emily’s sphere. Daud doesn’t want that for her, even while wanting her with a deep possessive need. He’s all the surer that a return to Dunwall would be trouble for all involved.

“Yes, but… what we have-”

“Is here, and will always be here, as long as I live.” He sets his hand to her cheek, turning her gaze to his. “Let that be enough.”

Emily looks at him for a long moment, then moves, touching her lips to his, then sinks down to lay her head against his chest, water swaying and rippling before coming back to rest. “Then I shall just have to come back.”

Daud’s heart lifts and then sinks under the weight of everything a statement like that holds.


The next day they finish research and write the letters as a weak sun starts melting the snow, but it’s all day at the desk with hands cramping before the dirty work is done. Daud offered the whole books containing the details Emily seeks, but she won’t have them – they must remain here, she says, part of the set that he himself completes.

New details come up in the copying of each passage that escaped his memory first time around, so by the time the job is finished she holds the best records that would ever exist of the crimes her would-be betrayers committed to secure their positions through the years.

“Blackmail is dirty work,” Emily contemplates over their evening meal, knowing the morning will signal her departure but making peace with it – as much as can be made. “No way to hold onto a crown.”

“There are dirtier ways,” he points out with a hand resting over hers. “You make the best you can of a bad lot.” One more lesson before she goes.

“Would you come with me?” she poses. “If I asked?”

“Are you asking?”

“I’m asking what your answer would be if I did,” she subverts cleverly.

Daud shakes his head. “You don’t need me with you for this one.”
“But if I did?” she suggests with hope in her eyes. “Need you, I mean.”

“The only reason I would ever return to that stinking rat pit is if you needed me, Emily,” he tells her straight. “Do not doubt that.”

She smiles, and Daud can’t resent being played. “I know,” she purrs, sliding along the bench to wrap closer to him like an overly-affectionate lapcat. “But I like to hear you say it.”

He tilts her head back, twisting enough to stretch into a kiss that starts hands wandering. “And what else would you like to hear me say?”

Emily meets his gaze, shine of brown in the darkness of her eyes by the fire, and says, “I love you.”

Daud brushes her cheekbone with a kiss, and repeats it. “I love you.”

“No,” Emily straightens up, and Daud’s gut ties itself into a knot he didn’t realise it could still be twisted into. “I do.” Against all belief, there’s colour teasing her cheeks. “I love you, Daud.”

The fire crackles, and though tomorrow Emily will leave, tonight she’s here, and in time will be here again – and for Daud, that’s plenty. He takes her face between his hands, marvelling for a moment that this – any of it, all of it – could happen, and that a wretched man could be so lucky. “I love you too.”

Chapter End Notes

I decided to challenge myself not to end this one on Emily leaving, which feels like the obvious end-point, and so help me I wanted to try and make as much of a positive of it as I could. I know this pairing sets up for a lot of heartache if not actual heartbreak, and wanted to make something as warm and ‘this is for the best’ as possible.

As far as more additions like this goes, I don't have plans at present, but that does not mean nothing will ever come of it. Writing this story is like coming back to an old friend, and I always have time for old friends.

Happy holidays and a happy new year to everyone, I for one can't wait to bury this year and move swiftly on to 2018.

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