

Chapter 17

A FINAL RAY OF LIGHT

"I am so sorry you had to wait such a long time to see me again. I should have come sooner; I realize that now. It's just so difficult, you know? Sometimes I wonder why I have been so scared to visit you. I guess a part of me held on to a fantasy that as long as I didn't come here, none of this ever truly happened and I am just trapped inside a dream I still need to wake up from. And then you . . . and we . . . I'm so sorry I didn't come sooner."

Raven went down on his knees and raised his eyes to a sky that was slowly being gilded by a setting sun. Dozens of seagulls were circling high above him, mocking his soliloquy with squawks that sounded an awful lot like hysterical laughter. "Yeah . . . you're right. It really is a lousy excuse."

He proceeded to grab a porcelain cup out of his backpack and filled it with a specific brand of rice wine his father used to love. "Old man Bill still makes these after so many years. Can you believe that?" He reached inside his backpack for another cup and filled this one with mead, his mother's favorite drink. "Fresh from the bee's butt as you used to say. Do you remember?" He placed the cups in front of two gravestones and lowered his forehead to the ground three times. The waves that were crashing against the cliff below him were akin to the appreciative chants of an excited crowd inside a packed arena.

"Maybe I was afraid you wouldn't be able to recognize me anymore. So much has changed since we last spoke. There isn't a whole lot left of the boy you once knew. I have done things in my life I'm sure you would never approve of, but I still hope you are proud of the way I have turned out, considering the circumstances. Mom, Dad . . . you have always taught me to follow my heart no matter how difficult the journey may seem and I have done my best not to stray too far from your lessons, but the road I have taken is full of obstacles and I'm afraid that Rayne might be in danger because of the choices I made. Please forgive me . . . I never should have encouraged her to follow in my footsteps. If I were a better brother, a better son, then maybe she . . ."

He took a deep breath and cast his watery eyes on a blood-red horizon where the sun started to sink into the sea. A gentle breeze caressed his cheeks as if to tell him that everything will be alright again.

"We celebrated my eleventh birthday here. Do you remember, Mom? I was so happy that day. You and Rayne wore beautiful dresses you had made yourself and pretended to be high-born ladies. Even Dad looked like he could pass off as a noble lord. I swear, that had to be the only time I ever saw him walk around without his apron. Anyway, we were having a picnic and Dad brought along a basket full of his self-proclaimed world-renowned sweet cream pastries. A sudden gust of wind swept the whole basket over the cliff and I nearly dove into the sea trying to catch it. Dad held me by my ankles as I dangled over the edge. You and Rayne were screaming in panic and I believe I was grinning as I got pulled back up, tightly holding on to the basket. I don't think I have ever seen you so angry, but it was well worth it though. The pastries really were that good, Dad. I wish you would have shared your secret recipe with me before you . . ."

He chuckled and freely let the stream of tears flow down his cheeks. The seagulls above his head seemed to cackle along with him this time as if they also shared the fond memories of that particular day.

"Luckily, you were able to laugh about it in the end and even gave me a big kiss for saving the picnic. Afterward, you handed me 'The Hero of Ambria' as a present and whispered in my ear that I was sent from the heavens above to protect this family. You were sure that one day the whole realm would see me as a hero. Mom, Dad . . . I miss you so much . . ."

He put a hand over his mouth to hide his lips from quivering as if he didn't want his parents to see him so vulnerable and fragile. But nothing could bring them back and he had to live with that knowledge for the rest of his life. The sun was almost completely submerged, but still shone a final ray of light that seemed to be meant specifically for him alone. He kept staring at the extinguished horizon until even the afterglow of purple and pink faded to black.

"I have to leave now and I don't know if I will get the chance to visit you again." He paused for a moment to get himself recomposed. "I swear to you that I will bring my sister back to safety no matter how difficult the journey ahead of me may be, so that the next time we meet, Rayne will be by my side, and our family once again united."

He lowered his forehead to the ground and closed his eyes for a long time until he felt the presence of someone right next to him. His first thought went to his father and mother, but then quickly dismissed it as a fantasy that could never become reality. His second thought went to Rayne, but that scenario was almost just as unlikely.

"Has your stubborn son finally decided to pay you a visit, Mister and Missus Silverstone? It sure took him long enough, wouldn't you agree?" A young woman with long, blond hair tied into a knot knelt down beside him and placed a flower in front of the two gravestones. She then put her palms together and whispered a prayer under her breath.

"Saffron . . .?"

The woman continued praying for a while and slowly slid her eyes to the side once she was finished. "So, you haven't forgotten about me after all."

Raven immediately choked up and stared back completely petrified. He wasn't prepared to see her here, or in all honesty, anywhere for that matter. Had he known, he would have practiced what to say beforehand so that he wouldn't gape at her with his mouth half-opened like a dim-witted moron. On top of that, his cheeks were soaking wet and his eyes swollen red. This was not how he wanted her to see the *Hero of Ambria*.

"Why have you been avoiding me? No, wait; *evading* would probably be the more accurate term."

Raven chose to remain silent. Any excuse he could come up with sounded immature even in his own thoughts so there was no point in making himself come across as an even bigger fool. If only he were able to borrow Cato's eloquence just for this moment and find the right words to express his true feelings. However, it would seem that Saffron insisted on hearing an answer, and even though he really didn't want to take his eyes off her, the ground below him suddenly became a whole lot more appealing to look at as it certainly was nowhere near as intimidating as her piercing gaze.

"I'm not evading you . . ." he finally muttered after an uncomfortable silence. *Well done, Raven. What a perfect response, and delivered with such sincerity as well.*

"If you say so." She got up to her feet and brushed some dirt off her knees. "You left without saying goodbye the last time. Were you planning to do the same again this time?"

He was, but saying it aloud seemed like a frightening prospect now that the matter had been laid bare. "Of course not."

She giggled. The sound gave him a warm, fuzzy feeling on the inside like hearing the first birds chirp after a long and bitterly cold winter. "You always were terrible at lying. It's fine. It doesn't matter if you intended to leave without seeing me. I'd be hurt, sure, but you don't owe me anything. In fact, it is I who owe you *everything*. We all do. Without you, the entire village would have been sold into slavery. Maybe I was no more than a silly little girl, but I always thought you took a liking to me when we were young. I guess I hoped you would be happy to see me again after such a long time."

"I am . . ."

Saffron raised an eyebrow. Either Raven had become a world-class liar in a matter of seconds, or he was actually speaking the truth. "Anyway, if not as a friend — or at the very least an acquaintance — you still should have visited me as a patient. I can tell you haven't fully recovered from your injuries yet." She clicked her tongue and shook her head. "Stubborn as always."

"What are you *doing*?!" Raven almost squealed when she knelt down in front of him and placed a hand under his shirt without warning. He felt a stream of healing energy pour into him through her icy hand, but instinctively reached for her wrist to yank it away. He wasn't used to getting touched by any women besides his sister and mother, least of all in an intimate spot such as his lower abdomen.

Saffron placed her other hand on top of his and held it there with force. "Your heart is racing and you feel as hot as a lump of coal."

"Must be a fever or something," he said with a reddened face and uneasily cleared his throat.

"If you waited much longer to seek medical aid, you would have died from blood poisoning. And that is no way for a hero to go now, is it?"

Raven said nothing in return. All his efforts went into forcing his heartbeat to a slower rhythm, but it only seemed to have the complete opposite effect.

"Hawke told me you have become his master."

Raven winced and chewed his lip. He almost forgot about that and wondered why he accepted the plea in the first place. Perhaps he was feeling nostalgic and the moment reminded him of a time when Rayne begged Cato to become her master, but in truth, he likely would have said just about anything to keep that pesky kid from bugging him. "Your brother is very persistent. Some might even say to the point of being intrusive."

"Oh yeah. That's Hawke alright." Saffron gave him a wink and retracted her hands. "So, when are we leaving?"

"What?" He might have been healed, but somehow, a strange, burning sensation seemed to be melting his stomach from within. "We?"

"You didn't think I would let my baby brother wander off into the unknown without me, right?"

"Actually, I didn't think he would seriously consider following me beyond the borders of Ambria, otherwise I wouldn't have accepted his plea so carelessly. The journey ahead of me will be dangerous."

"Well, you'll just have to accept the consequences of your actions, Kibek. Besides, I would never allow him to leave if I didn't think he could take care of himself. Hawke may look like any other scrawny little shithead, but he is actually very gifted."

Raven would have told anyone else that he preferred to be called by another name, but for some unfathomable reason, he didn't really feel like correcting her at all. Something about her calling him by his former name felt very comfortable and familiar. It felt *right*. "Gifted?"

Saffron nodded with her eyes closed, giving Raven a fleeting chance to gawk at her without shame. "That's right. He even received an invitation for Aethelwomb a few weeks ago."

Raven flinched in surprise. He always wished to receive an invitation himself when he was younger so that he could follow in the footsteps of his childhood hero, Fox Silverfang. But according to his sworn brother, the training that he received was quote, unquote 'vastly superior' to the 'overrated' teachings of the academy. Whether that was true or not, he would probably never find out. "Aethelwomb huh? That's quite an honor."

"Yup. Just like his big sis."

"What?! You went to the academy?"

"You know, some people may actually feel terribly offended by the way you said that." Saffron folded her arms and raised a single eyebrow as if waiting for an apology, but before Raven was able to say anything, she already waved him off. "No, I refused their invitation."

"What?! Why?!" He almost sounded insulted, but quickly toned down his voice. "Being a graduate of Aethelwomb alone would have catapulted you to the upper echelon of society."

She shrugged. "There are more important things in life. I would have been gone for five or more years. Who was going to take care of Hawke in the meantime?"

"Oh . . ." Raven lowered his head in shame. He had forgotten that both her parents passed away in an accident when she was only twelve and that she had taken care of her little brother on her own ever since, which was probably one of the reasons why they hung around the Silverstones all the time. "Hawke is lucky to have you as his sister."

"That goes without saying," she said with a straight face. "Just as Rayne is lucky to have you as her brother."

He ground his teeth and clenched his fists. "I'm not so sure about that. Rayne might be in danger because of me. If I haven't been so goddamn stupid—"

"We're going to save her, right? Isn't that what you promised your parents?"

"You heard that?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I also didn't want to interrupt the precious moment you were having."

It stayed quiet for a moment as they both stared at the two gravestones that were glowing in the moonlight.

"Why did you come here anyway?"

"Ever since my parents passed away, Mister and Missus Silverstone have taken care of me and my brother without question. We owe them a lot. We owe them our lives. I visit this place quite often, especially when I have a lot to think about. Also, I had a feeling I would find you here."

"They always enjoyed your company at our place."

"I hope they weren't the only ones at your place to do so."

Obviously, being the best friend of his sister, Rayne enjoyed her company as well, but more likely than not, that wasn't who she meant. He blushed, but luckily, his skin almost blended in with the darkness of the night. "I won't be able to guarantee your safety." What a smooth and tactical maneuver to shake off whatever it was she said. "I don't think you'll like it very much, but I also intend to bring along someone else who can possibly aid me on my quest."

"What, you mean the half-face?" She scoffed and waved him off with the back of her hand. "You're right. I don't like that very much at all, but if having him around makes it easier to bring Rayne back, I couldn't care less."

He wanted to say that Rayne was lucky to have her as a friend, but wisely refrained from doing so in case a similar sentiment would somehow get projected back at him, and there were only so many diversions he possessed in his conversational arsenal.

"So, when are we leaving?"

"I actually planned to leave half an hour ago."

"What, so you really were leaving without seeing me?"

"Well, I—"

"I'm just fucking with you, Kibek."

If only, Raven thought and found it increasingly impossible to stray away from that imagery.

Saffron gave him a smirk as if she were able to catch a glimpse of his thoughts. "What do you say we make a final toast to Mister and Missus Silverstone before we leave?"

Raven froze, but his cramped-up demeanor quickly melted into a smile. "I like that. Which do you prefer, rice wine or mead?"

"Give me the more potent stuff. I'm already sweet enough as it is."