

Chapter 54

WHEN WE WERE GODS

After the Meralysian soldier had barged into the tavern with the news of an approaching horde of riders, everyone from the alliance hurried into the street to await the uninvited guests on the town square of Ambria. Raven followed along from the back, hoping he could quietly get a word in with Rayne, but she flicked his hand off her shoulder without meeting his eyes and quickened her pace to increase the distance between them.

Raven stayed behind on the empty street for a moment while the rest marched to the center of the village without delay. Behind his back, the ominous sound of clobbering hooves grew louder by the second, but all he could think about was the damage he had caused to his relation with the person who had stayed by his side for as long as he could remember, the only one who had always showed him nothing but unconditional love and support. He lowered his head to wallow in shame, but at that very moment, he noticed from the corner of his eye that a figure in a narrow alleyway was mimicking his movements. He turned his head to the side and flinched in shock; it was as if he were staring at himself in a foggy mirror.

"You . . ." Raven briefly stared into the street and saw that his allies had already become distant shadows in the dark. He turned back to the alleyway, but the figure began to walk away from him. He gnashed his teeth, clenched his fist, and finally made the decision to enter the narrow path between two buildings and follow the hooded figure. It was only when he got himself surrounded by tall, brick walls that he began to suspect he might have willingly walked straight into a trap, but his curiosity dominated any other thoughts. He needed to find out the truth about his heritage. It was the only reason he returned to the place he had sworn to avoid for the rest of his life.

"Stop!" Raven yelled when he had been following the stranger halfway across the village. The smell of the back alley was strangely familiar, so much so that he started to get overwhelmed by a sudden surge of memories he had locked away for many years. Instances of the time he spent with the Silverstone family flashed before his eyes. He choked up when he finally realized where he was standing. Everything still looked the same after six long years. His eyes trailed off to the side, knowing exactly what they would find.

The names 'Finn', 'Heather', 'Rayne', and 'Kibek' were carved into the reddish brick wall. He remembered sneaking off one night with Mom's knitting needle when he was only ten in a sudden urge to profess his love for his family. The following morning, Mom was furious to find out that one of her knitting needles had been completely ruined. She chased after Raven in a fit of rage, but when she finally caught up to him and recognized the names of her family members permanently etched into the foundation of their home, she fell on her knees and broke down in tears. Raven had never seen his mother cry before and immediately shed tears of his own out of sheer guilt. He never intended to cause her grief. Mom reeled him in for a tight squeeze and explained in between a salvo of kisses that she wasn't crying out of sorrow; they were happy tears. It meant the world to her that the boy she found abandoned on the streets a few years prior had fully embraced his new family as his own. For all the instances he was so eager to forget, Raven never denied himself the access to that particular memory. It was probably the most significant moment of his entire life; one that taught him the profound power of love. Thinking back on his past brought tears to his eyes, but no happiness could be found within these teardrops. Mom was dead. Dad was dead. His sister was disgusted with him.

"Kibek Severon," the stranger said with his back still turned to Raven. "We finally meet again."

Hearing his name in full for the first time brought a chuckle out of him. Raven swiped a hand across his cheeks and took a deep breath to find his composure. "And you must be Sobek."

"I am surprised you know my true name. Not many people in Aedin do." The stranger turned around and lowered his hood to reveal his face.

Raven flinched. Cato already said that Jackdaw looked like him, but he always assumed the comparison wouldn't go much further beyond the color of his skin. Not to even mention that Cato wasn't exactly the most reliable source at the time. Raven hated to admit it, but the similarities were uncanny indeed.

“Sobek Severon to be precise.” Jackdaw lit up a grin. Even that gave Raven the impression he was staring at his own reflection.

“Are we . . . brothers?”

“Half-brothers,” Jackdaw answered dryly. “We share the same father.”

Raven swallowed a big lump down his throat and didn’t know how he was supposed to react. “What do you want from me? Why have you been searching for me? Whatever happened in the Unknown Realm is of no concern to me.”

“Unknown Realm? Do you have any idea how silly that sounds?” Jackdaw laughed as dozens of riders passed by behind his back. “And you are wrong. What happened in Nimos very much concerns you, little brother. Father is dead.”

“My father died six years ago at the hands of someone you appointed to Queen Rosa’s council.”

“Wolfe Redmane?” Jackdaw laughed again, but this time it sounded more like a sneer. “He is yours to do as you please. I’ve been keeping him by my side so that I could gift him to you as a present when the opportunity would arise. He is one of the major reasons Nimos — or more accurately, Wudan — has gone to shit.” He lifted his robe and used one of the crates in the alley as a chair. He pointed at another crate with a flick of his chin. “Take a seat. We will be here for a while.”

Raven stood motionless, his fingers tightly curled into fists. His eyes rapidly bounced from side to side as he counted the riders passing by. “What makes you think I won’t kill you here and now?”

Jackdaw raised an eyebrow. “Why would you want to do that?”

“You murdered two hundred and twenty innocent civilians,” Raven said through gritted teeth.

“You are mistaken,” Jackdaw calmly countered. “I could argue that it was your sworn brother who did most of the murdering, but I’m not going to insult you with such an easy sneer.”

“They were no more than walking corpses when we encountered them. Their lives had already ended long before.”

“Yes. It was the work of Taimujin Sivalok, Isau Heliranok, Ilandra Aurealis, Ivandor Nostram, Mura Isihiro, and Valyse Everlong. I was the one who led the Meralysians to Doriva, but it was the plan of my spouse to collaborate with that despicable collective of trash.”

“Are you saying you’re not working for Cain Everlong?”

Jackdaw scoffed and cocked his head to the crate beside him. “Come. Sit. Obviously, you’re interested in what I have to say. So, please, take a seat. I won’t bite, you know? If I wanted you dead, I would have killed you all back in Doriva.”

Raven remained frozen for a moment, but eventually grabbed the crate with both hands and placed it against the wall below the names of his family. He sat down with his arms crossed.

Jackdaw glanced at the names and laughed. “It’s funny, you know? Our names, I mean.”

“How so?”

“In our native tongue, ‘sobek’ means ‘raven’ while ‘kibek’ means ‘jackdaw’. It makes sense for me to be the bigger bird seeing how I am the older sibling.”

Raven chuckled. That actually was pretty funny. “If you are the older sibling, why did Valyse call me *lubora*?”

“What is *lubora*?”

Raven frowned. “Supposedly, it carries the meaning of the word ‘crown prince’ in the old Dorran tongue.”

Jackdaw sucked his teeth and went off on a long-winded rant in a language Raven couldn’t understand. “Let me tell you a story. Long ago — and I’m talking about many hundred years here — the people of Wudan were called ‘the Guardians of Heaven’. You see, at the heart of our nation grew a tree that could apotheosize anyone to divine heights. By drinking the tree’s sap, one would obtain powers that no mortal was meant to have. And when we were gods, we reigned supreme. Every lesser leader across Nimos knelt before us and were subsequently subjected to our rule. But when there was nothing left to conquer in our own realm, our arrogance convinced us to set our sights on Aedin.

“We entered the southern realm through the mountain passage in Doriva. Our army was said to have surpassed a million troops, many of whom wielding the powers of a god. We were so confident of conquering the foreign realm that we didn’t even leave any forces behind to defend our own lands.

“One day, an Aedinian army under the command of a woman only known as Valyse managed to sneak into Nimos undetected. Of course, the first thing she saw when she entered our realm was the enormous tree that clawed through the sky. It was said that on a clear day, the tree could be seen from every corner of Nimos. Valyse learned that the tree was the source of the Nimosian army’s strength. And with all Wudani troops gone on foreign conquests, the tree was left completely unguarded.

“She drank the sap and elevated herself to a goddess. She ate the fruit and turned into something not even gods could dream of becoming. You see, eating the fruit was forbidden among our people, for the fruit was the heart of the tree. Without the fruit, of which there was only one, the tree would die. Legends say that her careless act turned the tree to ash in mere seconds.

“When the Nimosian troops finally caught wind of the disaster, it was already too late. Valyse returned to Aedin with her own army of gods and annihilated our forces with ease. Using the blood of our people, she managed to grow a new tree from the seed she had stolen, one that Aedinian chroniclers later called *Désiva*.

“With our own tree gone, and the passage to the south sealed by a powerful barrier, our realm descended into an era of war. The Wudani empire was torn apart by internal conflicts. And even now, many centuries later, we still wear the scars that have been left behind by our own hubris. Wudan is barely a tenth of what it once was; our land, still covered in ash like a barren desert.

“King Kiryl Severon, our father, aimed to restore our nation to its former glory, but his position was constantly threatened by bitter rivals and jealous siblings. Fearing an insurrection, he made the decision to hide his second son in an attempt to preserve his dynasty; the only child he had with his one true love, Queen Ayadeya. No one knew where the boy named Kibek had been sent to and it was supposed to stay that way until he became ready to fulfill his duty as the next king.

“But then, Father was murdered; assassinated during the celebrations of his own birthday. Coincidentally, this also happened six years ago. The death of a monarch is a strange occurrence, you know? The moment it happens, everyone seems to think they will automatically move up a spot in the hierarchy; out with the old, in with the new. At that point in time, I had already forgotten about your existence. As Father’s ever-faithful and *only* son, it was natural for me to assume that I would be the one to succeed the throne. Just as caterpillars inevitably become butterflies, a prince has no purpose but to become a king. In his will, however, Father named you his heir. *You*.”

Jackdaw paused for a second and rubbed his hands through his dark, wooly hair. He raised his eyes to the sky when a couple of fiery streaks shot across. He noticed that his long-lost brother was about to jump up from the crate and rush for the town square, but he calmly continued his tale.

“Of course, you were nowhere to be found. The only person who knew of your whereabouts, Queen Ayadeya — *your* mother — died a few years earlier.”

Raven was already halfway out of the alleyway, but froze for a few seconds before he turned back to Jackdaw. He never knew his real parents, but learning their deaths still made his heart weep. This must have been how Cato felt at the betrothal feast in Rokhan. “How did she die?” he asked quietly.

“A tumor in her brain,” Jackdaw answered, tapping his temple with a forefinger. “Queen Ayadeya was a good woman.” He paused and waited for Raven to decide whether the story should continue or not. Sounds of thunder rumbled somewhere in the distance. The entire sky seemed to light up with numerous colorful flashes.

“With both monarchs dead and the heir apparent missing, the crown naturally fell onto my lap,” Jackdaw continued when Raven kept staring at him with a miserable grimace. “I would have been a good king. Wudan would have risen from the ashes like a phoenix and soar to heights it had never reached before. Father would have been proud of me, but before I had the chance to don the crown, Syfer Severon — that is our uncle by the way — already seized power. One of his first acts as *king* was to offer me the choice to either be executed or exiled. He didn’t want to come across as a tyrant, but he also knew my very existence was a threat to his dynasty. Offering me a chance to live was his first mistake. He then presented my mother with the same choice, knowing full well she would rather die than to leave Father’s side. Killing her was his second mistake.

"I fled to Aedin with the help of a man and his daughter. Judging from their silver-colored hair and bright, blue eyes, they weren't from any nation of Nimos. Somehow, they found a way to open the seal to the southern realm. They even told me they helped the late Wudani king hide his son all those years ago.

"After a long journey that took me halfway across Aedin, I heard a story of a boy with skin as dark as a moonless night who murdered the son of a nobleman somewhere in a nation to the west called Meralys. I knew that the boy could only be one person, so I immediately traveled west and followed the rumors that eventually led me to Ambria. However, I was too late. They told me the boy had already been executed. The halfwit in charge even tried to have me arrested for resembling the boy.

"It wasn't until years later that I learned Wolfe Redmane had lied to me. By that time I had already worked my way to the top of the Meralysian hierarchy. Kibek Severon was no more than a mere afterthought. But then Saraki of the Sand contacted me and even had the nerve to tell me it was time to repay my debt to the *emperor*. I wasn't aware what he was talking about at first, but then he told me the names of Cain and Valyse Everlong, and their plan to replant *the* tree.

"Now, I know what you're thinking and I was struck with the very same thought. Could it really be that Valyse Everlong and the Valyse of the legends were one and the same? How? The Wudani people haven't been called 'the Guardians of Heaven' for over a thousand years. But, then again, those who have consumed the fruit transcend mere godhood.

"They told me they were after a descendant of Ifra Baratok, who was said to hold a part of the primordial aura. They wanted me to hunt him down. I had no intention of aiding them in their cause, for it was them who brought on the downfall of my nation. On the other hand, this man named Cato Baratok possessed something that didn't belong to him. I accepted their assignment."

"You could have killed Cato in Doriva. Perhaps not when we were in the city, but you had plenty of opportunities in *Val Roka*."

"Yes. I could have killed him *and* the woman who stayed by his side the entire time. I only learned later on that she, too, possesses part of the primordial aura." Jackdaw paused and rubbed his bearded chin with a forefinger. He then lit up a thin smile. "They want to kill Cain Everlong and destroy the tree. Let them kill each other. Seems easier that way."

"Death to false gods," Raven muttered. "Was that your message?"

Jackdaw laughed and seemed to beam with pride. "That sounds rather dramatic. Doesn't it? But yes, that was my warning to Cato Knight, Maya Bloodthorne, Cain Everlong, and Valyse."

"I won't let you hurt my brother," Raven said through gritted teeth.

"I am your brother," Jackdaw immediately rebuked. "I am not the evil entity this entire realm wants me to be. All I want is justice for the centuries of pain my people, *our* people, had to endure."

"Every nation of Aedin wants you dead for the murder of Queen Rosa."

Jackdaw scoffed. "Haven't you been listening? The purpose of a prince is to become a king. I didn't have to foul my hands; Willow's ambition knows no limit. All I had to do was to promise the advisors mountains of gold for the rest of their lives and they were all too willing to fuel my wife's mind with wicked thoughts."

"You will never succeed," Raven said. His right arm turned into a sleeve of undulating, white flames. "Some of the most renowned warriors of Aedin have gathered here to stop you."

"Indeed," Jackdaw said and slowly rose to his feet. He kept his eyes on Raven's arm without showing any fear. "What's the moral of my story, Kibek? What is the one thing that brought down our nation? Aesha Celestine and Mykon Bloodthorn are here; the only commander left to defend Onyra is perpetually drunk. Without Rahziel Mantarok and Ziyan Hizarok, the king of Malakhai is left unprotected. Melo Czesnar and Alane Divorak are the guardians of Rakonia's sole heir. Riza and Jiza Oro are the only commanders of Kyogun, not old and senile. Leiana Ramatore is the most influential warrior of Ludor while Enzo Sennavelli serves as King Dario's second in command. Soma Domset and Noelle Navazzi, admittedly, aren't that important, but Aespira will fall another way. Everyone came at the invitation of my wife who, after all, perfected her handwriting under the tutelage of her own mother."

"You plan to throw this entire realm into chaos?!" Raven closed the distance in an instant and stretched his arm. The entire alleyway radiated in a brilliant white that turned everything it touched to dust.

"The purpose of a king is to become an emperor," Jackdaw continued undisturbed. The bright light passed through him as if he were made of glass. "You will not stop me, little brother. I was never even

here.” He reached out to give Raven a pat on the shoulder, but his hand was no more than a mere projection and instantly vanished upon contact.

“What was the point of this conversation?” Raven growled, extinguishing the flames on his arm when he realized how futile his attack was.

Jackdaw flinched in surprise. “A formal reintroduction, Kibek Severon. And making sure you aren’t caught by ‘the Eye’. It would have been a shame if everything ended before our reunion took place.”

Raven frowned, but instinctively spun around when a huge, shadowy pillar suddenly rose to the sky like a monstrous worm. The horror immediately reminded him of Cato’s dark companion. His eyes widened when he realized the location of the auric manifestation. He glared at Jackdaw for a brief moment and dashed onto the open street.

He came across a large horde of riders on his way to the town square who were all staring at the sky in awe. The black cylinder was collapsing under its own weight and started tumbling down at a frightening pace. He waded through the walls of horses and managed to catch a glimpse of his sister before the auric wave crashed onto the cobblestones, flooding the entire town square in a substance of pure darkness.

Raven fell to his knees, finding it impossible to breathe. Tears were already rolling down his cheeks, but he was too choked up to actually cry. The black substance vanished immediately after impact, leaving behind only the emptiness of a devastated town square. They were gone. Everyone disappeared. “Rayne . . .”

Three riders who were separated from the horde turned their horses around and stopped right in front of Raven. “You are all the same. Kings and queens, sinners and saints; a breath in the wind,” one of them said in a cold, dead voice.

Raven immediately recognized it as the voice that had called him *lubora* in the Dorran desert. He raised his head, but couldn’t gather the strength to bare his fangs anymore. “What about gods?”

Valyse responded with a thin smile. “There is only one god.”