

Chapter 20

ON A FOUNDATION OF SKELETONS

Raven lay sprawled out on a fluffy mattress of an ornately carved bed, thoughtfully staring at a ceiling that was lavishly embellished with a mosaic made from countless colorful tiles. He remained motionless for hours on end, finally given the opportunity to reflect on everything that had happened since he became separated from the alliance with whom he was supposed to prevent Jackdaw Blackshaw and Willow Whiteshade from claiming the throne. The past week had been a chaotic chain of events, but he somehow managed to navigate through the mayhem like a weightless leaf on the back of a whirlwind. And now, for reasons that were completely unknown to him, he and his companions were invited to stay at a luxurious establishment as guests of honor by the very same people he had been tasked to eliminate.

They were given the entire top floor of an inn called 'The Meralysian' to use as accommodation for the duration of their stay in Vicarys. The opulent suite — more than twice the size of Raven's own house in Serenity Hills — had a grandiose living room, four spacious bedrooms, two bathrooms, its own kitchen, and a pantry that was fully stocked with a great variety of fresh fruit, dried meat, pickled vegetables, and sugary-sweet confectionery. It was the sort of luxury his sworn brother had always avoided whenever he traveled across the realm as an emissary of Onyra, for the simple reason that much more valuable information could be gathered from the common folk who weren't able to afford staying even a single night at a place like The Meralysian if they emptied their entire life savings.

Raven finally understood the logic behind that reasoning now that he had become the one to take the lead. After having spent less than an afternoon running around the city like a headless chicken, he had already learned more from the vendors in the streets than he otherwise would have if Finch — the head servant of the Whiteshade family — had awaited him at the main gate of Vicarys instead.

The news that Rokhan had been attacked by a duo of highly-skilled warriors deeply unsettled him. Now that he was given the time to spare more thought on the matter, he could only pray that the Malakhi princess who supposedly lost her life during the attack wasn't the charming captain of the city guard. Not that the death of either of King Ifra's other granddaughters was any better, but Zaphyra Mantarok was betrothed to his good friend, Marcus, and together, they symbolized the future of the realm.

His thoughts trailed off to Cato and Maya — who were still staying in Rokhan when he departed for Meralys — and hoped that they remained as safe and blissfully in love as the last time he saw them. Even though he already dismissed what Valyse and Taimujin had told him as gibberish, he couldn't help feeling a suffocating sense of dread. *What if they were right and Cato really did die?* His heart already wept from the thought alone, but he forced himself to think more optimistically, just as his sworn brother had always taught him. Cato believed in him, so he had no other choice than to return the sentiment.

By the time Raven realized he was still staring at the ceiling, he noticed it was already pitch black inside the bedroom. Night had fallen and Meralys was only a few handful of hours removed from crowning a new king and queen. Tomorrow at noon, he was expected to stand beside the royal couple on the balcony of the Dragonspine castle and witness the historic event from up close as their guest of honor. He couldn't deny it presented him with the perfect opportunity to assassinate them both and fulfill the wishes of the realm, but the costs of such a deed weighed heavy on his mind.

I would never make it out of the castle alive, let alone the city. And what about Saffron and Hawke? They have nothing to do with the realm's politics and don't deserve to be dragged into this mess. They never should have followed me down this dangerous path. He let his mind wander off for a moment and eventually had to admit he was lying to himself. The truth was that he felt fortunate to have them by his side. The idea that he had to be there on his own absolutely terrified him. He just wished he had the confidence to be a worthy leader. If only his sworn brother were there to tell him what to do.

What do you think, Cay? Would Meralys truly be better off if Jackdaw and Willow were eliminated? Do you think it falls under my duty to Onyra — or to the realm for that matter — to stop the coronation even if it means my own death? But regardless of my safety, should it even be up to the other nations of Aedin to decide

the ruler of Meralys? You have always taught me that the leader of a nation should first and foremost be a servant of their own people. Everyone I have spoken with today seemed content, if not excited about their new king and queen. And if the Meralysians are happy with the course of their nation, then who are we as outsiders to say they are wrong?

He paused his thoughts to await an answer, but then he merely sighed and went on with his musings.

Yes, you're right. Jackdaw may very well be rotten, and I understand you hold a personal grudge against him, but is he really that much worse than any other leader of Aedin? Grandmaster Amon orchestrated a rebellion against the monarchy and seized the power for himself. King Ifra killed thousands of people before he was able to unify Malavi and Khainox as one nation. The Firanzas slaughtered the Navazzis and usurped the throne of Ludor. Even the peaceful transition of power in Aespira hasn't gone without its share of unrest. Look, I'm not saying they're incompetent leaders in any way; the people obviously prospered under their rule. But I guess my point is that many nations were built on a foundation of skeletons, and as time progressed, those corpses ended up fertilizing the dirt from which a beautiful flower came to blossom. Perhaps Jackdaw and Willow may yet prove themselves to be the leaders who will guide Meralys into a golden age.

He forcefully put a stop to his thoughts as he felt himself getting worked up speculating about matters that were far too intricate for an uneducated mind such as his own. But try as he might, the thoughts kept on rolling like a tidal wave, getting bigger and bigger until they crashed and scattered across his mind.

And somehow, the people from Wudan are involved as well. He always expected that seeing people who looked like himself would have been an emotional occasion for some reason, as if they would instantly recognize him as their own and embrace him into their community. But the truth was that he felt nothing when he saw the dark-skinned people from the north, nothing beyond the surprise of actually seeing them anyway. There was no mutual acknowledgement, no deeper connection, no profound sense of belonging; nothing. If anything at all, seeing the Wudani people roam the streets of Vicarys only made him feel even lonelier. Why are they here and how did they enter Aedin? There must be another way to cross the realms.

His breathing intensified and his hands were straining into fists. I'm sorry, Cay. I can't throw away my life for the sake of the realm just yet. I made a promise to you that no harm would come to our sister for as long as I'm still breathing. I made a promise to my parents that I will return one day with Rayne by my side. I already broke one promise, I refuse to break the other as well. No matter what happens tomorrow, I will find a way to bring her back to safety.

And with that final thought, Raven got out of bed to join the others in the living room, but he must have spent a lot more time than he initially intended when he retreated to mull over his thoughts, because the entire place was dark and abandoned.

He heard the muffled voice of Saffron coming from the bedroom adjacent to his own. Seduced by curiosity, he carefully shuffled closer and placed an ear against the wooden door. From the sound of it, she was probably reading a bedtime story to her little brother. A part of him wanted to keep listening, but a bigger part realized he must have come across as a creepy stalker if anyone saw him then and there, so he tiptoed away and went into the pantry to grab himself a bottle of Ludori Red instead.

It may have been for the best if he tried to catch some sleep as well, but with the way his mind was still racing, it was far more likely he would only stare into the darkness until sunrise. Might as well get loaded to pass the time and distract himself from his thoughts. He plopped down on the sofa and uncorked the wine with his teeth, but before he even had the chance to put the bottle to his lips, he was already getting annoyed by a discord of grating snores that came from Faeliks' bedroom. He sighed, took a quick swig of the wine, and went out on the balcony to get drunk under a star-filled sky.

Everything was laced with a silvery glow from a gibbous moon that seemed to look down on the city like an enormous crooked grin. Raven sat down on a stone bench, took a big swig from the Ludori red, and raised the bottle high above his head as a salutation to the nocturnal sky. "To you, Cato of Moonshield; the finest man I have ever known," he murmured as he only now remembered that his sworn brother had turned twenty-four over a week ago. "I hope you don't miss me as much as I miss you," he added under his breath.

"He must be a very special person to you, this sworn brother of yours."

The unexpected voice of Saffron sent a jolt of electricity throughout Raven's body and rendered him too paralyzed to turn around and face her. "He is . . ." It sounded as if he wanted to say much more than that, but instead put the bottle to his lips for a few more gulps. "You sure like to eavesdrop on me."

"Says the one who stood by my door just moments ago."

Raven flushed crimson red. It must have been the effect of the wine and nothing else. Ignoring what she said, he took another gulp.

"You know, there is nothing quite so sad as seeing a man trying to get drunk on his own."

"You should be in bed. What are you doing here? It's cold outside."

"Oh, I'll be fine." Saffron sat down beside Raven with a blanket draping over her shoulders. It stayed quiet for a while before she let out a playful giggle. "You really have no idea how to take a hint, do you?" She grabbed the bottle out of his hand and put it to her lips for a timid nip. "Hmm, interesting."

"Ludori Red . . ." he whispered under his breath and watched her take a few more sips, absolutely mesmerized by the ethereal sight of her fair skin that seemed to glow as it bathed in the moonlight.

Saffron arched an eyebrow when she noticed him gaping at her without saying a word for a good minute. "Everything alright, Ki? You look a million miles away."

Raven shook off his reverie and averted his eyes. "I have a lot on my mind is all."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense then. Out with it. We are in this together now, aren't we? It's high time we start to get reacquainted again, don't you agree?" She took a few more sips from the wine and handed back the bottle.

"There are things you will be better off not knowing."

"Then tell me things that fall into a different category. My god, are you ever not so serious? I'm only looking for a little heart-to-heart here. Just talk to me."

Raven twisted his lips and took a deep breath. He wasn't used to opening up to anyone besides Cato. And even then, he always needed some persuasion to loosen his tongue. Usually a few puffs from Cato's pipe would be enough to nudge him over the edge and shed his inhibition, but since the suite's pantry didn't have any herbs of a certain kind for him to smoke, perhaps another gulp of Ludori Red might do the trick as well. It didn't. In fact, the alcohol only scrambled his thoughts even further.

A long moment of silence followed and seeing how Raven was struggling to find any words to say, Saffron decided to put him out of his misery, get up from the bench, and head back inside to leave him with his thoughts.

"Wait." It took Raven every ounce of courage to utter that single word, but he had a feeling he would regret it for the rest of his life if he said nothing at all. Luckily, it seemed just about enough to convince her and she remained motionless in the doorway, doing exactly as he said. "Please stay. I do want to talk. It's just . . . It is very difficult for me to express myself to certain people."

Saffron sat down beside him with a sigh and gave him a peculiar smile, almost as if feeling sorry for him. "I have known you all my life and you have always been that way, Ki. Why is that? How come you are the complete opposite of your sister in that regard? Don't you ever feel like just letting it all out? Everybody needs someone they can open their hearts to, otherwise you will only stack up your burden until you crumble under its weight."

Raven didn't dare to look back at her and instead lowered his eyes to the ground. "I don't think you would understand what it's like being me."

"Then help me understand. What is it like being you?"

He shrunk and felt miserably vulnerable as if he were asked to spill out his innermost secrets. "It's lonely," he said after a painful silence. "Imagine being an outcast all your life. No matter where you go, you already know that everyone will have their judging eyes zoned in on you and see that you are different from them. People will distrust your presence and whisper things behind your back. It is impossible not to feel unimportant when you get treated as if you're some kind of lesser being, so you grow a shell to hide in and shut yourself from the outside world. Nothing anyone might say can hurt you now. But in return, you have difficulty letting people get close to you because you are afraid that they will eventually pull you out of your shell and judge you for who you truly are."

"You're a turtle?" Saffron giggled at her own joke, but noticed that she was the only one who saw humor in the situation. "For what it's worth, I have always liked you for the way you are, Kibek."

He frowned at her as if he had trouble believing what she said. "You used to whisper into Rayne's ear and giggle whenever you saw me."

"Yeah, I did, didn't I? And what did you think it meant?"

"I don't know . . . Nothing good . . ."

She was surprised to hear his answer and flinched. For an agonizingly long minute, she just stared at him without saying a word, but eventually burst into laughter. "Seriously? I bet you can't see very well inside that shell of yours. You didn't think I only dropped by the Silverstones to play with Rayne, did you?"

He didn't know what she expected him to say. Obviously, she and her little brother also came over on a daily basis to eat along with his family, but he failed to see the relevance in that.

"Goddamn, you're dense. It's you, dummy. I came to be with you as well." She didn't blush, but started fidgeting with her hands as if she were wringing out her fingers. "I have always *liked* you, you know?"

Raven snickered, refusing to pick up whatever it was she just dropped down. "Please don't play games with me."

"What, is it so hard to accept that there is someone out there who likes you?"

"You are you and I am . . . me. You and I, we are *different*."

"So? That first part is just plain stupid if you really give it some thought, but I fail to see what that second part has to do with anything. See, you seem to think that being different makes you inferior for some reason, but have you ever considered the possibility that I like you *because* you are so unlike anyone I've ever met before?"

Silence. Again. Raven supposed it was his turn again to say something, but he had positively fallen into a state of utter shock. Perhaps it was the wine that influenced his senses, but it sure sounded as if she might have actually spoken the truth. And if so, what exactly did that mean?

Saffron scooted closer to him and even had the nerve to place a hand on his lap. "Don't you like me?"

Raven felt as if he were backed into a corner with nowhere left to run to. His insides were burning him to a crisp and his mouth became as dry as the Dorran. Time seemed to stand still for a moment as he gathered his courage to stare into the eyes that were glistening in the pale moonlight. The answer was on the tip of his tongue, but it felt as if the next word that would pass his lips might hold the gravity to determine the course for the rest of his life. He heard the voice of his sister screaming at him to say something, *anything*. He heard the voice of his brother telling him to release his inhibitions and just go with the flow. He heard the voice of his mother encouraging him to follow his heart.

Suddenly, it all became very clear to him. Words were never going to be his strength. Thoughts only made him insecure and doubt himself. He had always been a man of action; do first, regret later. What was the worst that could possibly happen anyway? Just moments ago, he was contemplating the decision to forfeit his life for the good of the realm. Surely, this was a choice that was much easier to make. He leaned in and placed his lips on hers. In and out, swift as a bird picking at a prey; clumsy and awkward, exactly as someone's first kiss should be.

It happened so fast that Saffron only blinked back in surprise. She then burst into a snorting laughter. "What the hell was that?"

"I'm so sorry! I—"

"That is not how our first kiss should be." She lifted his chin with a single finger and leaned in closer. So close, she could smell the Ludori Red on his breath. "Let me show you how I always envisioned it."