

Chapter 41

INCONVENIENCES

Unlike the colorful extravagance that was found within the Belly of the Cat, the throne room of *Boroka* was a brooding affair of sober gray and rigid black. Everything was made from a variety of similarly dull stones, and due to the monotonous color palette, it was quite easy for an inattentive visitor to miss out on the artistry that went into the room's intricate decorations.

Eight imposing columns made of basalt stood across the spacious room to form an octagon. Each had been carved in great detail from top to bottom and depicted the entire story of Ifra Baratok's life up to the moment he became king. One column showed his humble beginnings as the oldest son of a shepherd. Back then, Rokhan was a village that barely reached a thousand citizens. Another column portrayed the massacre of his family during the never-ending war between Malavi and Khainox. Three full columns were needed to depict the heartbreak that led him to take up arms and form a rebellion. One column to display his conquest of Malavi and another one for Khainox. The final column showed the unification of the two nations that resulted in the birth of Malakhai.

Hundreds of doll-sized figures were sculpted into the walls with lifelike precision, representing the heroes who gained recognition for their contribution to the nation and were subsequently rewarded with a perpetual seat in the royal court. Not only warriors and politicians, but athletes, scientists, scholars, artists, writers, poets, musicians, and entertainers as well. One of the figures was even that of a simple fisherman who earned his rightful place among the legends by feeding an entire village during a famine.

In the great hall of Ashencat, crests of the noble houses were recreated in the stained-glass windows that dropped down from the ceiling to the floor. When the sun graced the Belly, all symbols would be projected on the mosaic tiles. In the throne room of *Boroka*, family emblems — or 'oksin' in the Malakhi tongue — were etched into the wall behind the dais to symbolize that Malakhai was more than solely the one person on the throne.

Flames of a thousand candles brought the room to life with a strangely hypnotic performance of flickering lights and dancing shadows. King Ifra stared at the spectacle on the ceiling with a troubled mind, having just heard in meticulous detail everything that had happened to his Onyran visitors for the past few weeks. He slumped into his throne, lazily resting his bearded chin on bony knuckles. The eight-pointed crown that was made from an alloy of gold and titanium lay on his head a heavy burden.

He lowered his old, glassy eyes to the two blood-crusted packages that tarnished the sanctity of his beloved throne room. His face immediately wrinkled into a grimace like a sun-dried raisin. The death of a well-respected warrior such as Dhasun Vizesok was sure to cause unrest among the nobility.

He briefly glanced at the Onyran delegation. Of all the troubling news they brought, the mention of Cain Everlong was the one that unnerved him the most. It was a name that hadn't crossed his mind in decades. He often wondered how different the realm would have been if Amon did what needed to be done all those years ago. But after the death of Adem, he fully understood why his friend couldn't do it. Even if he knew that the realm would one day pay the price, he could never blame Amon for not having the heart to kill his own son.

And now, Cain Everlong was called an emperor, which meant that he had the strength of multiple nations under his control. What he intended to do with all that power wasn't important. Regardless of the objective, Cain was a malignant tumor that needed to be stopped before he could spread out to the entire world. What made Cain so dangerous wasn't necessarily his abilities, but rather the road he was willing to travel to achieve his goals.

Ifra held his eyes on Cato. Having developed a strong bond with the Onyran lord over the past few years, he had gained a pretty decent read on his young friend. He could barely imagine what a profound experience it must have been not just to kill eighty-five people in one fell swoop, but to ingest all their memories as well. However, that wasn't what seemed to be the reason for Cato's concern. Again, it was Cain Everlong.

The king wasn't surprised to hear that Cato's aura was coveted by Amon's first-born child. That ambition had been known to him for decades. It was the very reason Cato lived the first years of his life the way he did; to be kept hidden from the eyes of Cain. Only when Cato's dark companion awakened, did it become necessary to provide the orphaned boy closer protection. And now, Cain had finally found him.

Not many people of the younger generation had the privilege of witnessing the true power of Cato's dark energy. In the wrong hands, it was a mere tool of destruction; a black hole that sucked everything into nothingness. But wielded by the right person and having its full potential unlocked, the *primordial* aura could apotheosize the entirety of mankind.

Ifra glanced at one of the two young women among his Onyran guests. Calling the ability to gift others the means to manipulate aura 'Ava's Blessing' was a necessary injustice to keep the identity of the other goddess hidden. It didn't mean that Ava wasn't a goddess in her own right, only that two forces were needed to establish a balanced harmony. Without darkness, there could be no light. Ava was the goddess with an infinite well of aura. Nyx was the goddess who actually distributed the power to the mere mortals. With the two of them combined, everything could be made reality.

"Your Majesty," Cato — prompted by a nudge from Maya — said when the throne room had remained silent for quite a while. The Onyrans had been awkwardly left to their own devices after recounting their experiences of the past few weeks, and were tensely staring at the Malakhi king for a reaction like a bunch of miscreants awaiting punishment at the principal's office. "Do you have anything to say to that?"

"Shush, *dom bini*! I'm still pondering."

Ifra ignored the resentful look he received and instead turned to the dark-skinned man behind the Onyran lord, squinting his glassy eyes of faded green. He had been told many tales of the adventures Cato went on with his talented pupil, but was never granted the opportunity to meet Raven in the flesh. It wasn't the first time he came across someone with such a curious complexion and wondered if they were connected somehow. At the very least, they did look alike.

And now, Jackdaw Blackshaw was colluding with Saraki of the Sand. It worried him deeply. Doriva was supposed to be the barrier that prevented unwanted figures from the northern realm from leaking into Aedin. Saraki may never have been known as loyal or even trustworthy, but it would be foolish to dismiss all that he had achieved with Doriva considering its limited resources. For a proud individual like Saraki to abandon his life's work could only mean that he had been promised something Aedin could never give him; the throne of an actual nation.

The abandonment of Doriva was a realm-wide dilemma that needed to be resolved with the highest urgency. As long as the passage between Aedin and the north remained in their control, Cain would have to find another way to enter their realm. But the mention of a black, oval-shaped gateway made the old king apprehensive. The 'Eye of the Void' was an auric technique, unique to the Vilavaldia clan of Ludor. This knowledge presented the king with an unsettling predicament, as the Vilavaldia clan had long been eradicated from existence by the Bloodthorne clan of Mengarovi during the Great War.

Ifra stared at Marcus with an intensity that would make any *Garovi* feel like an inadequate pup. The arrival of the Bloodthorne prince was supposed to be a cause for celebration, but so far it had only brought him a heavy heart. Four of the six riders Marcus mentioned bore the names of legendary figures who only still existed in history books: Isau Heliranok, Ilandra Aurealis, Illio Vilavaldia, and Ivandor Nostram. If Marcus had paid better attention to his surroundings, he would have recognized one of the riders in the statuettes that were carved into the walls of the throne room.

The mention of the name 'Valyse Everlong' raised one of the old king's eyebrows. Marcus called her the daughter of Cain, but Ifra questioned the truth of that claim. He had seen the name before in the Everlong ancestral mausoleum when he attended the burial of Amon's wife, Sera. He remembered a stone tablet at the end of the main corridor which listed every member of the Everlong clan in chronological order. At the top of the list was sculpted the name of the family matriarch, the very first person to carry the Everlong name: Valyse of Doriva. The king acknowledged the possibility of Cain simply naming his daughter after the founder of his clan, but it all seemed too fitting somehow to be brushed off as mere coincidence.

To think that someone with the abilities of Taimujin Sivalok had been recruited by someone as dangerously ambitious as Cain Everlong troubled the old king. It could very well turn out to be a recipe for

disaster on a scale the realm had never seen before. Especially if the tree that Cato mentioned had indeed come back to life.

“Bora Ifra—”

“Arrash khum boya, dom bini! Can’t a king think in peace?” Ifra flinched when he noticed it wasn’t Cato who interrupted his musings. “Junior,” he said with a grin and waved to the man at the doorway to take a seat on the empty throne beside him.

The man nodded and strode toward the dais in large, heavy steps. He was clad in an armor of thick metal rings and held a horned helmet under his armpit. He stopped halfway in the middle to glance at the skinless, half-decaying corpse. He grunted, briefly caught a glimpse of a monstrous creature’s severed head next to Lord Dhasun, and grunted again. He slowly raised his head to Cato without letting the other four pairs of eyes distract him along the way. His face was heavily scarred with the claw marks of a terrifying beast. Only a black void remained where once his left eye had been. “What have you done this time?” he asked and continued his stride to the dais, not remotely interested to hear the answer.

“You are late,” he said in a gruff and imposing voice as he sank into the throne that once belonged to Queen Ariana. His lone eye pierced the young Garovi who forced a boulder down his throat.

Marcus knew who that man was, solely judging from the damaged helmet that had earned him the moniker ‘the One-Eyed Ox of Khainox’. “My apologies, Lord Rahziel. We were held up.”

Rahziel Mantarok was a name that commanded respect across the realm. He was revered for his prowess on the battlefield and universally praised for the role he played in ending the Great War. But what really elevated his status to legendary heights was his well-documented rivalry with Mykon Bloodthorne that ultimately culminated in a duel for the hand of Nia Seraphine. The feud was so famous, it became the inspiration for numerous books, plays, songs, and paintings all across Aedin. And now, the son of his nemesis was set to become his son-in-law.

“It’s a long story, Junior. Come here.” The king raised his hand to wrap his bony fingers around Rahziel’s head. They both shut their eyes and retreated to a motionless silence.

“I see,” the general said after a few long minutes. He opened his lone eye and turned to the foreign visitors. “People from Oni-Rah bring nothing but trouble.”

“Apologies for the inconvenience, Lord Rahziel.” Cato made a stiff bow and placed a fist against an open palm. “We will take our part of the responsibility in this situation.”

“Inconvenience?” Rahziel growled. “Lord Cato, an inconvenience would be to share a carriage with someone who suffers from chronic flatulence. Taimujin Sivalok colluding with the likes of Saraki of the Sand and Cain Everlong is a reason to prepare for the worst. Tell me; what measures has Umbora Amon taken to counter the indiscretions of his son?”

“Indiscretions?” Cato said, knowing full well that he shouldn’t. “Lord Rahziel, an indiscretion would be to accuse someone in a foreign court of hypocrisy. Make no mistake; Cain Everlong is an enemy of Onyra, and by recruiting Saraki of the Sand, Jackdaw Blackshaw, and Taimujin Sivalok to his side, has turned himself into a danger to the entire realm. Be assured that Grandmaster Amon will act accordingly to the threat when the time comes.”

Rahziel squinted his lone eye for an agonizingly long minute before slumping into the throne with a thin smile. “You haven’t changed one bit, Lord Cato. Quite surprising, considering your newly-gained . . . inconveniences.”

Cato spread his arms around Raven and Rayne who had been staring at their boots for the past few hours, feeling awfully out of place in the Malakhi throne room. “I call them my brother and sister now,” he said with a wide grin. Whatever else he gained was none of Rahziel Mantarok’s business.

“I will summon the Malakhi nobility for a gathering. It should take no more than a few days for everyone to arrive. We will discuss the matter regarding Cain Everlong then and decide our course of action.” Ifra sprang up from the throne with great agility and stretched his back. He inadvertently let a wind pass, very much to the dismay of his general, who stoically took it to the face in silence. “I also expect a delegation from Aespira to arrive within two days. Coincidentally, they may just be the ones you want to have a talk with, Lord Cato.”

“Aespira?” Cato asked, his arms still wrapped around his timid siblings. “Soma Domset? Noelle Navazzi?”

“Both.”

“Not that I would mind, but why should I be interested in talking with them?”

“*Dom bini*, are you still dulled by the effects of poppy crystals or something? Cain Everlong approached you after you visited Spiraea. Aeron Everlong has three children who all live in the capital city. How do you think Cain attached himself to you? I take it you have paid them a visit, yes?”

Cato nodded absentmindedly. He felt like a fool for never having made that connection. In retrospect, even his master may have suggested an occurrence during his stay in Spiraea. His mind trailed off, wondering how much his master already knew when they last spoke.

“We all have much to think about, but let us conclude this audience on a lighter note, shall we?” The king lowered back into the throne, assuming a much more lively posture than before. “You,” he said, aiming his finger at the male Bloodthorne. “Tell me your terms.”

Marcus flinched in surprise, not entirely sure who the question was meant for, even though the king’s bony pointer made it obvious that he should be the one to answer it. “What?”

Ifra leaned forward and dug his elbows into his thighs. “Young lady,” he asked the other Bloodthorne instead. “Are all members from your clan dim-witted?”

Maya responded with a courteous curtsy; not the one she was used to giving her entire life, but the one she learned a few hours ago from observing Rokhan’s captain of the city guard. “Surely not, Your Majesty. Perhaps only the male members.”

The king cackled heartily, surprised to hear such a sharp answer. “Lord Cato,” he said in all seriousness. “Take good care of this one.” When he was replied with an equally solemn nod, he turned back to Marcus with a challenging grin. “Young man, you wish to marry Zazy, do you not?”

Marcus didn’t know how to react. Even if it was true that the young captain had been on his mind ever since she left them at the gatehouse, that knowledge should be accessible only to himself. And even his inner voice urged him it was best to forget about her. “Your Majesty, Lord Rahziel,” he carefully began and shifted his eyes between the two on the dais. “I assure you that I have come to Rokhan for one person and one person only. My wish is to make Lady Zaphyra my wife.”

“Good, good,” the old king nodded contentedly. “So, what are your terms?”

Marcus glanced at Cato, who demonstrated his usual helpfulness with a slight twist of the lips and uninvolved eyes. He glanced at his sister; her reaction was pretty much the same, albeit a whole lot more judgmental. “Your Majesty,” he finally said with some hesitation. “I’m not sure I understand your question.”

Ifra slapped his knees and turned to his general with a flustered cackling. “*Mala, Mala*,” he muttered along with a few Malakhi expletives that vividly portrayed numerous deviant activities involving chickens and ducks, to which the general nodded in agreement. “Let me explain to you in terms even my cat would understand.” And right at that moment, a cream-colored cat with clear blue eyes and dark brown extremities jumped on the old king’s lap. “Olly!” Ifra exclaimed in joy and gave a few brushes until the cat purred in ecstasy. “Your representatives offered me a proposal for a union. I — and to a lesser extent, Lord Rahziel — accepted the offer on the condition that certain terms are met. Your representatives accepted the terms and left it up to you to finalize the agreement. So, Marcus Bloodthorne; what are your terms?”

“Before you receive an answer,” Cato finally said, holding Marcus by his shirt. “Please remind us what your terms were.”

Ifra sighed. Olly also huffed and started licking his paws. “First term; Marcus will swear an oath to Malakhai and take up permanent residence here as a Malakhi lord. Second term; no granddaughter of mine will be called Bloodthorne. The Malakhi nobility wouldn’t stand for it. A lord and lady of Malakhai must have a Malakhi name. And third; my yet-to-be-born great-grandson will take the throne when he comes of age and Onyra will acknowledge his sovereignty.”

Marcus nodded without having anything to add. He already knew the terms and didn’t even realize he would be put in a position to make demands of his own. Not that it mattered; he already accepted the proposal the moment he decided to leave Mengarovi. “I don’t—”

“Hush,” Cato intervened with a slap to Marcus’ arm. “One; Marcus Bloodthorne is a name with considerable influence around the realm. He will not be absorbed into any existing family. A man of his stature deserves to be the patriarch of his own lineage. Two; The union of Marcus and Zazy will result in a full alliance between our nations, including a defense pact. If one gets attacked, the other will come to the

aid. Three; In the event of absence on the Malakhi throne before your future great-grandchild has come of age, Marcus will be named co-regent along with his wife.”

Marcus would never dream of making such hefty demands on his own and was staring at Cato with eyes that almost bulged out of their sockets. He was grateful to have someone so well-versed in the art of negotiation at his side, but at the same time, utterly flustered to hear Zazy’s name when it had already been clearly established that he came to Rokhan for Zaphyra.

“Who are you to make demands here, Lord Cato?” Rahziel asked, heavily unamused with the interference, never to even mind the implications of the terms. “Are you Lord Marcus’ father all of the sudden?”

“The agreement involves multiple people, Lord Rahziel. One of them is Grandmaster Amon. I am Amon’s Voice on foreign soils. It is fully within my right to set the terms. That is unless you challenge the authority of my title. In which case, you question the sovereignty of *Umbora Amon*.”

“No need to get feisty, Lord Cato,” Ifra said and eyeballed his general into obedience. “We accept your voice as Grandmaster Amon’s. As for your terms; they are not to be taken lightly.” He bent over to give Olly a kiss between the ears. Olly barely responded to the affection and kept licking his paws with a smug arrogance on his chubby, furry face. “One; accepted. It should have been obvious that my throne will not be soiled by a Mantarok. A new family name will be determined as soon as possible.” He glanced to his side and chuckled. “No offense, Junior. Blame your father.”

“None taken,” Rahziel replied in a flat voice. “And I do.”

“Two; accepted. Malakhai and Onyra will fight side by side as brothers and sisters in arms in all future battles. Three; rejected. I will not die before I witness the ascension of my successor. Entertain my death again and I will slap you in the face.”

“If you won’t die before that time, you have nothing to fear and might as well accept the term.”

“Stubborn as always, *dom bini*. Why so headstrong?”

“Orphans are opportunistic. I simply aim for the stars and hope to land on a spot higher than before, Your Majesty. Marcus is a dear friend of mine and I don’t like losing negotiations.”

The king burst into a cackling laughter until he began to wheeze. A sudden lightning-quick whip of his hand hit Cato in the face with an invisible slap. It happened so fast, the Onyran visitors didn’t even have time to gasp. “You spoke of my death again,” Ifra said solemnly and tickled Olly — who seemed very much unimpressed with the thunderous clap — under his chin. “Accepted.”

“Excuse me,” Marcus said. His face contorted into a frown of absolute bewilderment. “Are Zazy and Zaphyra the same person?”

“*Mala, Mala*,” Ifra said, burying his face inside his palm. “You really are the son of your father.” He sighed and didn’t even dignify the question with an answer. “Get freshened up, my young friends. We will have a small feast in the dining hall to seal the agreement. Welcome to the family, Marcus. As for the rest of you; for the duration of your stay, you will be my guests of honor, but do not abuse our hospitality. Get yourselves something more fitting to wear. You look like you’re here to assassinate the king.”

“Your Majesty,” Cato hurried to say while still nursing his reddened cheek from the auric slap he received. “May I have a word in private please?”

The king sighed and rose from the throne, dismissing the request with a wave of his hand. “Another time, Lord Cato. I’ve had enough excitement for one day,” he said and made his exit, leaving Olly curled up on the throne.

Marcus gazed at the cream-colored fur-ball with a frown. Olly stared back with calculated indifference before he closed his eyes and ignored the smelly visitors in his throne room.