

Chapter 3

CHASING SHADOWS

After having received a humbling serving of Salavor's verbal beatdown, Cato was left with many things to think about on the party's journey to the hideout of the Malakhi scouts. He was riding his black stallion called Onyx — gifted to him by King Sol the Seventh as reward for the critical role he played of a neutral mediator in a conflict between Rakonia and Ludor — with a sullen demeanor that was far beneath the worthiness of someone who received the privilege of mounting such a majestic creature.

He sat slouched on his horse, moping and coping; hating the reality of suffering through the rough saddle that started to flay the skin from his ass after having already sat on it for the better part of the past few days; hating the fact that he was still chewing on the same stale, tasteless bread that Sandahl brought along when they left Rokhan almost a week ago; hating the freezing cold that numbed every part of his body except for his even colder heart. But most of all, hating himself for being who he was, or rather, who he had become.

Ever since he left the private paradise that Maya had shown him on the night of Marcus and Zazy's betrothal feast, he was filled with an unexplainable emptiness as if a part of him had stayed behind in that magical place. He felt abandoned like a widower having lost a companion and there was no escape from that overwhelming sense of grief. Even when he left Knightsong Haven as a child and abandoned everything in his life that he had known up until that point, there would always be a place within his mind he could retreat to for solace, but somehow, he even seemed to have lost the directions to his so-called Shadow Realm.

Now, whenever he lay down with his eyes closed, only nothingness would come to greet him in silence. No longer could he hear the voices of those who had been swallowed by his dark companion and subsequently became a part of him. It didn't bring him the peace he always thought he would find, but instead left his heart with a void that he only seemed able to fill up with bitter longing. He had embraced the unknown — exactly as Master Hana had told him to do at the Onyran gathering almost six weeks ago — and now he was adrift.

But even in absence, the resentment of his accumulated lives had already seeped into his personality. The remnants of their presence contaminated the clarity of his mind and reduced his brain to nothing more than a toxic blob of meat, but he just couldn't find the means to stop his grim thoughts from spreading. He was ashamed of the constant anger he felt that screamed at him from within to take down the entire world and everyone in it. He did everything he could to resist his hunger for destruction, but the torturous desire to let it all burn was a flame that only grew larger with every passing day.

Still, he never intended to butt heads with Salavor. The Malakhi commander had always been a great friend to him, and was no less than reasonable for wanting to seek contact with his compatriots to find out if something might have happened that made them miss the appointment. He didn't even know what made him say the things he said and couldn't have been more disappointed with the way he acted. "I'm sorry," he muttered under his breath.

Salavor was leading the party to the hideout of the Malakhi scouts and fell silent in the middle of a conversation with his pupil who rode beside him. "Apology accepted," he said, not making an effort turning around to face the Onyran emissary, but it was obvious he spoke the words wearing a triumphant smile.

Cato raised his head with a frown. His words weren't meant to be heard by anyone but himself, for it was mostly to himself that he apologized. Nevertheless, he was relieved to know he hadn't burned down any more bridges with his Malakhi companions, especially after already having made himself an enemy of Sandahl earlier in the morning. The journey ahead was likely to be filled with danger and having an auric master such as Salavor Inkharok on their side would be an invaluable addition to any party expecting trouble. "How long until we get there?" he asked, not knowing anything else to say, and still harboring too much pride to repeat his apology with more conviction.

"Not long now, but we will have to continue the last part on foot."

Nazari winced, utterly disheartened by the daunting prospect. The inexperienced seeker who only discovered his blessing when he already became a fully-grown man, was already exhausted from their unsuccessful trip to meet up with the scouts earlier that morning and looked outright miserable for even having to keep his eyes open. While his physical features as well as his martial skills left very much to be desired — especially since he received training from someone who many regarded as the strongest warrior in the entire realm — his seeking talents were undeniable and possibly even exceeded the potential of Ziyan Hizarok, Malakhai's primary seeker.

"Stay focused, Naz. I need to know if and when we are being watched. Danger always finds a way to show up when least expected and we are in fact traveling a very dangerous road." Salavor gave a quick glance over his shoulder and sucked his teeth. "Not a word, Lord Cato."

Cato responded with a similarly dismissive sound. "I have nothing to say," he grumbled and immediately forced himself to put a damper on the many things he actually did want to say about their current situation. This entire journey had been an amateur shitshow from the start.

In order to reach Doriva from Rokhan, most travelers would have opted to cross the Dorran. Not because it was the shortest route to the remote settlement, but simply because it was the safest and provided the clearest path. Despite what inexperienced travelers might say, the desert was relatively free from danger if those undertaking the journey were well-prepared and at the very least possessed a fundamental understanding of navigation. They would use the sun during daytime and the stars at night to find their way across the featureless desolation. Without naming names, only a totally inept idiot would manage to get lost in the Dorran.

Salavor, however, made the decision to take the route through the mountains in the north that started at the heart of Meralys and stretched halfway across the realm, ending at the utmost southern tip of Malakhai where the nation shared borders with Kyogun and Rakonia. This route was supposed to save them one or two days of travel, but came with a lot more risks. Natural hazards such as blizzards, landslides and avalanches weren't the only dangers they had to consider. There were many caves and thick patches of vegetation for bandits and predators to hide in as well. Unlike the empty desert, where potential enemies could be spotted from afar, the mountain forests provided many opportunities for an ambush.

But the time they would have saved by traveling the shorter route was forfeited again now that they were taking a detour. It wasn't ideal, but the Malakhi commander needed to get an update on the situation from the scouts that were placed to keep an eye on Doriva. The last report he received came on the day his party departed from Rokhan and had been nothing short of unsettling; the note delivered by the homing pigeon was left completely blank. Coupled with the fact that the scouts missed their appointment at the meeting place — thus disobeying a direct order from King Ifra — he had every reason to be concerned.

"I'm so very tired," Nazari moaned while yawning. "I haven't had a good night's sleep since we left Rokhan."

Salavor chuckled. "Naz, how many times do I have to tell you that sleep is the cousin of death? Ask Lord Cato if you don't believe me. He knows all about it."

Cato sighed and rubbed his eyes with a thumb and forefinger. "Look, if you're referring to that one time I fell asleep in the tavern and you were inspired with the hilarious idea to wake me up at sunrise with a bucket of horse piss, then yes; I can tell Nazari all about how sleep comes dangerously close to death. Not my death, mind you, but death nonetheless. If, however, you have another story in mind, I would need some elaboration on whatever it is you're suggesting."

Salavor smiled thinking back on that fine morning at the Widomok when he — still very drunk himself — almost had his throat opened up by Cato's instinctive reaction to danger. The ever-broadening smile told anyone who could see it that showering Cato with a bucket of lukewarm horse piss was definitely worth it. "Mmm, good times," he said and allowed his face all the time it needed to crawl back into a serious frown. "I can understand if you don't feel obliged to share personal experiences with us, but you should know that feigning ignorance about something so blatantly obvious will only further arouse my curiosity. So, I'll ask you directly, Lord Cato; do you still dream?"

The question annoyed Cato on the level of an itch inside his ear he wasn't able to scratch. He snickered and glared at Salavor until their eyes met. "What exactly are you asking me?"

The Malakhi commander laughed with his hands raised as if to pacify an escalation, but just as quickly turned deadly serious again. "Do you still get visitations in your dreams, be it Cain Everlong or anyone else?"

Cato flinched and lowered his eyes to the black mane of Onyx. Hearing that name out of the blue made a chill crawl up his spine. "No," he said after a long silence. The word left his lips almost as an admission of defeat. He didn't get visited by anyone at all when he closed his eyes at night. There was nothing in the void; only him and the silent darkness.

"I see," Salavor said and rubbed the stubbles on his chin to give Cato's answer some more thought. "You sound disappointed."

"It's complicated." Cato took a deep breath in an attempt to find the right words to say. "*Mala, Mala,*" he then mumbled and uneasily cleared his throat. "Things have changed since Maya and I . . . Look, I know deep down that everything went the way it was supposed to go, but I just can't shake off the feeling I'm missing a part of myself that I have to reclaim in order to become whole again. And that hole inside of me only seems to grow with every passing day. I fear that I'll lose myself completely if I— You know what? Never mind. I'm not the only person who has issues to deal with."

"It's not healthy to suppress your feelings, Lord Cato, but I do understand these aren't easy things to talk about with someone who can't possibly relate to what you're going through. Have you talked with Lady Maya about it at least? I'm sure you have seen that she has been heavily affected by the changes as well."

Cato scoffed. "If I didn't suppress my feelings, I would have destroyed everything I have ever cared for already." He let his eyes drop and cherished the peaceful silence for a while. "She told me she woke up from a bad dream this morning."

"Indeed. She was talking in her sleep and spoke in a tongue I have never heard before. My guess is that she is the one who receives the visits now."

Cato's eyes widened in shock and it deeply disturbed him that he couldn't be certain whether that came from envy or concern. He knew Maya had been struggling to cope with the changes, of course he did. Having spent so much time together in that magical place, he had come to know her better than he knew himself. Though admittedly, he did have trouble finding his own identity as of late. "What makes you say that?"

"Mmm." Salavor nodded with his eyes closed and rubbed his stubbles with his forefinger again. "When she woke up, I showed her a book I received from Lord Damao. Upon seeing the strange runic symbols in the book, she turned as pale as the moon and went absent for a few good minutes. Eventually, she snapped out of it and told me she had seen the runes before on the face of the girl called Valyse as well as in the dream she just woke up from."

Cato glanced over his shoulder to find Maya who rode a few dozen yards behind him with Sandahl at her side. The look he received from her just before they left the cave unnerved him to the very core of his soul and he had trouble deciphering the meaning of it. She looked utterly terrified, but at the same time, hauntingly terrifying; as if finally coming to the realization she had been a famished predator that lived amongst her prey all along. At that very moment, the green, gold, bronze, aquamarine, and everything in between that were the palette of his dream became no more than meaningless names of colors that were hidden behind a veil of darkness. And in the dark, all colors looked the same.

He couldn't let that happen. He absolutely refused to lose her or allow her to lose him. Just thinking of a life where they wouldn't be as one filled his mind with rage. He would rather see the whole world burn before that possibility had the chance of becoming reality. He would see the whole world burn . . .

Maya looked up from the mane of her borrowed mare just as Cato returned his eyes in front of him, but she managed to catch a glimpse of his wrath and immediately lowered her chin again. Despite struggling to deal with her own tribulations, it was seeing the person she loved the most deteriorating to a walking vessel of fury that truly squeezed her heart to a bloody pulp. Her entire life she had never felt fear for any person before, but now found herself absolutely terrified even thinking about starting a conversation with Cato regarding the changes they both were going through.

On the surface, everything appeared to be the same as it had been for the past six weeks or so. Cato was gentle and kind, doing whatever necessary just to make her smile. It wasn't a particularly difficult task;

all he had to do was to look at her with love. But underneath the skin, she could sense a sickness had already spread across the body, and if left untreated, rot would eventually start to set in and destroy the flesh. She hadn't noticed it for a long time, but after having awoken from her dream, the hollow darkness in his eyes seemed to be all that she could see.

"Here, eat this." Sandahl broke off a chunk of his bread and waved it in front of Maya's face, dragging her out of her reverie.

Maya flinched, but quickly managed to get a hold of herself. She raised her hand and politely shook her head. Just thinking of food was enough to make her want to vomit. "Much appreciated, but I'm not hungry."

Sandahl chuckled when her refusal was immediately followed by the complaints of her rumbling belly. "You need the energy, Lady Maya. Not only for your own sake, but ours as well. I have a bad feeling about what we are going to find."

Maya reluctantly accepted the piece of bread and forced herself to show the Malakhi lord a thin smile out of appreciation. If she could spare the energy to give him any more than that, she likely would have. Her fever had fortunately gone down a bit, but she still felt completely drained and exhausted. It remained quiet for a while as Sandahl eyed her with a fatherly sternness until she would start eating. So, she nipped a small bite and chewed; without pleasure at first, but then tore into her second and third bite with much more eagerness.

"Here, I think you need it much more than I do." Sandahl held the rest of the bread in front of her chest. "Please take it. There's plenty more in my other bag."

Maya offered no resistance and let the bread fall into her palms. "Thank you," she said, already starting to show more liveliness in her voice. "That's very kind of you."

"Ah, don't mention it. You know, Ismah has told me a great deal about you, Lady Maya. My darling girl is not the easiest person to be around — believe me, I know better than most — but you have always been a good friend to her at Aethelwomb."

Maya instantly perked up thinking back on the period she spent at the academy. She could have graduated after four years like most of her classmates, but decided to stick around a bit longer to tutor the students who were experiencing difficulty with the teachings. Ismah Vizesok was one of those students and the two became good friends over the years. "Ismah is very dear to me," she said with a warm smile, fully meaning it.

Sandahl returned the kind expression with a grin of his own and gave his bushy beard a long, thoughtful stroke. "Anyone would be blessed to have you by their side," he said and paused at length to let his words sink in. "Your family deserves all the praise it receives. I am sorry for having missed your brother's betrothal feast. I assure you that it was not meant as a sign of disrespect. You see, a traditional Malavian funeral lasts eight days and eight nights."

"Please do not say that, Lord Sandahl. It is I who should apologize instead for not even having the decency to offer you my condolences yet. I know it doesn't mean much now, but I am truly sorry for your loss. From what I have heard, Lord Dhasun was a righteous man."

"My brother was a righteous fool. He should have waited for reinforcements before going after Taimujin Sivalok." Sandahl spat out the name through gritted teeth and whitened his knuckles on the reins. "But thank you." It remained silent for a bitterly long time even though this particular subject still seemed very far off from reaching its conclusion. "Lord Cato admitted to me this morning that he had the mind to ingest Dhasun. I didn't fully understand his meaning, but he explained in great detail what exactly happened to those he took with his aura." His voice was cold and cut sharper than the freezing gale that blew through the woods. "He told me the only reason he didn't condemn my brother to eternal darkness was because Lord Marcus already took action before he could. You were out there in the Dorran as well, Lady Maya. Was he telling the truth?"

Maya chewed her lip and answered with a solemn nod. She saw no reason to twist the truth in any way if Cato had already admitted to it.

"Then please offer your brother my gratitude on behalf of the entire Vizesok clan. Our body is considered sacred according to ancient Malavian beliefs. If Lord Cato had done what he intended to do — no matter the justification — I would have slit his throat and defiled his corpse using the very same blade

immediately afterward without giving it a second thought.” He paused at length and seemed to relish the prospect in silence while a wicked grin crawled onto his face as his breathing intensified.

Maya had nothing sensible to say in response. At the time, she fully stood behind Cato’s decision, and even now, she didn’t disagree with the reasoning. If they could have learned the enemy’s intentions back when they were in the Dorrán, at least they would have known what they were up against instead of chasing shadows in the dark.

“While I myself wasn’t present at the royal feast, I did receive an extensive summary of the evening’s highlights from Lord Salavor. It’s hard to imagine that this is the same man who endorsed the union between Malakhai and Onyra. Hypocrite *khumar toya*.” Sandahl ran his tongue over his teeth as if to inspect the sharpness of his arsenal and narrowed his eyes to put a mark on his prey. He slowly inched toward the hilt on his belt, but suddenly flinched and began to laugh. “My apologies, Lady Maya. I must have forgotten who I was talking to.”

“He is a good person,” Maya only managed to say in a tiny voice.

Sandahl continued laughing while scratching his balding scalp. “Yes, you are right. I have always been a terrible judge of character. Please forgive my insolence. I spoke out of turn. Of course, Lord Cato only did what he thought was right.”

Maya had no response at the ready, but lucky for her, it wasn’t necessary to dig too deep for one either. Her conversation with Sandahl came to an abrupt end when Salavor called the party together at the base of a cliff and asked everyone to hitch their horses to a tree. They were nearing their destination, but apparently, the last part of the route had to be taken on foot.