

Chapter 12

SHADOWS OF A BYGONE TIME

He couldn't see. Everything was shrouded by an absence of light that left him adrift inside a swirling cloud of jet-black fumes. Within the hazy darkness, shapeless silhouettes pranced around like a dizzying carousel that swung him in a vortex of melancholy and familiarity; similar to the unexpected touch of a former loved one from a distant past who had since become estranged. Shadows of a bygone time leaked from the depths of his mind where they lay buried for ages and demanded him to reminisce about the moments they had spent together.

"Where am I?" He wasn't able to tell with certainty whether those words truly passed his lips or that they remained confined to the boundaries of his thoughts. But what he did know was that the words sounded *unusual* — hollow and disembodied — as if hearing the echo of his own voice bounce back at him in an empty hall.

Drip . . . drip . . . drip . . .

A faint rhythm of droplets falling into a shallow puddle somewhere in the vast nothingness caught his attention. A sound so familiar and confrontational; it was as if memories he no longer claimed as his own forced him to acknowledge and accept his past life. Each impact of a droplet punching through the surface of the puddle sent a vibration throughout the shadows that rippled the very fabric of this unsettling darkness.

Drip . . . drip . . . drip . . .

The sound seemed to amplify as it echoed on and on until each iteration began to feel like cold needles puncturing his eardrums and injecting a dose of the purest pain straight into his brain.

Drip . . .

Loud as the desperation of a child who had lost his mother.

Drip . . .

Loud as the silence of an empty home.

Drip . . .

Loud as the regretful words that never should have been said.

"Please, stop . . ." His request was drowned out by the endless downpour of deafening echoes that steadily forced him into submission. The pain he was made to feel dragged him through an agony that left him mentally, physically, and emotionally broken. "Please . . ."

Drip . . . drip . . . drip . . .

Everything around him quivered from the overwhelming presence of the sound, and the louder it grew, the clearer his vision became. Vivid colors started pouring in from all directions to eradicate the darkness and reveal a glimpse of what lay hidden behind the black curtains.

Drip . . .

A home.

Drip . . .

A childhood.

Drip . . .

A family.

"STOP!" he screamed at the top of his lungs for all he was worth with the very last bit of energy he had left. Fortunately, it seemed to work as he instantly returned to the darkness with only a violent pounding of his heartbeat and a chaotic rhythm of his breathing to keep him company. Cold sweat ran down his forehead to join the blazing streams of tears on his cheeks, but he was too exhausted to even feel miserable. He just wanted whatever this experience was to end.

"Kibek," a voice called out to him from the darkness to vanquish the silence once more. A voice so cruelly familiar, so excruciatingly intimate.

"My name is Raven . . ." he answered shakily. The words were delivered with such fragility, even he himself couldn't be convinced of their truth.

"Kibek, are you listening?"

It's been such a long time since he last heard that voice, he almost forgot just how much he loved hearing that sound. "Dad . . .?"

And just like that, colors started flooding in again, much more vibrant and *alive* than before. It took no longer than the skip of a heartbeat for him to recognize where he was. The residual aroma of that morning's freshly-baked bread that would always linger inside the entire house until the deepest hours of the night, the crackling wood in the hearth that filled the living room with a cozy, protective ambience, the many colorful drawings of a happy family in better days that plastered the wall alongside the staircase to the upper floor; he was inside the house he grew up in. He was *home*.

Except he wasn't. He absolutely hated knowing that for a fact. What he experienced was more akin to a dream where he could be everywhere all at once, but simultaneously not bound to any place that was rooted in time and space. It felt as if he were the living room of his childhood home itself, as if he were the entirety of the moment he was presented with. But he wasn't in control of this painful experience, because if he were, he would never torture himself with an imagery he had long exiled from his conscious thoughts.

Drip . . . drip . . . drip . . .

He saw a younger version of himself sitting at a table and absentmindedly staring outside the window where heavy raindrops bombarded the cobbled street until shallow puddles of water were formed to cast distorted reflections of a darkening sky.

"Son, did you hear what I just said?" his father asked as he walked into the living room, wiping the flour from his hands on his apron.

"Dad . . ." He wanted to smile, but displaying a joyous expression like that would be no more than a blatant lie. Seeing the face he had longed to see for so long was perhaps the only thing that could possibly hurt more than never being able to see it again. He thought he had overcome the pain in his heart, but after seeing his father so vividly clear, the process of grief was bound to start anew.

"Huh?" Kibek spun his head in surprise, so deep within thoughts that he hadn't heard his father enter the room. "Dad? I'm sorry, did you say something?"

His father placed a hand on Kibek's shoulder and sighed. "I guess that's also an answer to my question," he said and started to laugh.

Raven couldn't help but to cherish the preciousness of that moment. How he missed the sound of that laughter. But then he realized which part of his life he was forced to relive. "No . . . Not *this day* . . . Please, *anything but this* . . ."

His father hunched down to meet his younger self at eye level. "You are just like your mother, always with your head in the clouds." A smile clung to his father's face to mask the sadness in his eyes.

Raven, even at that age, already understood that smiling was Dad's way of dealing with hardship. Unsurprisingly, he learned that coping mechanism from the very best. Mentioning Mom never went by without heartache, but Dad always slipped her into conversations despite the sorrow it would cause. It was how his father kept her presence alive in the family.

Kibek twisted his lips and returned to the scenery outside the window. He was brooding and not particularly in the mood to be interrupted. "Did you want to see me for anything specific?"

Raven hated himself for the way he reacted back then. Even more so now that he was able to see the look on his father's face. Why couldn't he just jump up from his chair, give his old man a tight hug, and tell him that he missed her as well?

"Do you know where your sister is?" his father finally asked after an agonizingly long moment of absolute silence. "It's getting late. She should have already returned home by now."

Kibek shrugged. "No idea." He was telling the truth, but knew all too well *why* his sister wasn't in a hurry to return home.

Rayne stormed off into town earlier that morning after an argument with him. She wanted to visit their mother's grave to show her a dress she had made, but Kibek thought that was a childish idea. He told her to 'grow up and get over it already.' Words that he now had to carry with him for the rest of his life. Words he knew could never be unsaid.

"Mom would have been so proud of you, Sis . . ."

"Well, help me out a little, will you?" Dad said. "There is still so much I have to do in preparation of the celebration of Lord Leonid's birthday and I don't have the time to worry about your sister as well."

Raven didn't know it back then, but he could see now that his father was wiping his cheeks as he said it. "I should have been a better brother . . . a better son . . ."

"Go out there and look for her, yeah?"

"Do I really have to?" Kibek almost shriveled at the request. He didn't like going into town all by himself. Somehow, people always seemed to find an inexplicable urge to shout things at him completely unprovoked. Words that made him feel insecure. Words that were invented with the sole intention to inflict pain. "I'm sure she just lost track of time."

Dad wasn't having none of that and justifyingly so. It was already dark outside and Ambria was not a place for a young girl to be wandering on her own at night. "You are her big brother, Kibek," he said sternly, sitting on the table with his arms crossed. "Look, we all have our responsibilities. The next few days will be very hectic and I need you to take care of your baby sister when I'm not around to do so. Mom also would have wanted you—"

"Yeah, yeah. Fine!" Kibek shot up from the chair, snatched his coat from the rack on the wall, and twisted the handle of the front door. 'I love you, son,' he still heard when he slammed the door shut.

Raven never allowed himself to think back on this specific moment for reasons that should be nothing short of obvious. He was still ashamed of the way he handled himself in that situation. But now that there was no other choice than to face the embarrassing facts, he came to the saddening realization that those were the very last words he would ever hear from his father. "I love you too, Dad . . . I'm sorry I failed you . . ."

Drip . . . drip . . . drip . . .

He saw his younger self walking through the gritty streets of Ambria. Water poured off the roofs by the gallons as the rain intensified. He remembered feeling fortunate that it was such terrible weather. People were less inclined to pay him any attention during rainfall. Most faces he came across were concealed behind colorful umbrellas while the rest were too busy fleeing the downpour to be bothered with his existence. But he had a long way to go; Mom's resting place was near the cliffs at the complete opposite side of Ambria. There were still plenty of opportunities for the townsfolk to notice him and undoubtedly shout out something ugly. He remembered begrudging his little sister for having him go through such an ordeal.

He saw the boy who was still known as Kibek Silverstone pass by the town square where a couple of hoodlums were loitering near the obelisk, sharing a pipe with laughter while dancing in the growing puddles of water. Kibek held his eyes stiffly on his boots as he crossed the square, doing his utmost best to remain non-existent. But despite his effort, malice would always find a way to claim an innocent victim. A sudden shove in his back sent him tumbling to the ground.

"Oh, so sorry, *Darkie!*" one of the hoodlums with the appearance of a bipedal swine said in a voice that seemed far too feminine for someone his size. "I didn't see you there . . . because it's nighttime . . . and you are dark . . . just like the night!" A joke so hilarious, he couldn't even deliver it without being interrupted by a hysterical symphony of snorts and giggles.

"Yahhhh! Good one, Bear!" Another hoodlum said in between a few short drags at the pipe. This guy looked like the unfortunate result of two siblings having made a drunken mistake at the wedding feast of their brother-father and sister-mother.

"Go on then. Get outta here, Darkling!" the swine-like youngster called Bear said as he forcefully shoved his boot against Kibek's lower ribs.

Raven felt disgusted with himself as he watched the weakling called Kibek flee the square in a hurry without saying a word. And if he remembered correctly, even the boy hated his own pathetic cowardice at that moment. Why didn't he just fight back? Surely a punch to the nose would have stopped their pestering, if only for a little while. He couldn't believe those degenerate scum had once been his biggest fear in life at one point in time.

He watched his former self scurry past a tavern called the Siren's Song. He remembered sneaking a few peeks at a couple of ladies outside the entrance who were dressed in a manner that would make it

extremely rude not to cast a few glances. Even back then, he didn't think they were all that pretty, but they did put certain parts of their bodies on full display that would fill the nocturnal fantasies of most boys his age. At the very least, the sight made him momentarily forget about the embarrassment that occurred at the town square.

"Watcha looking at, twat?" A sinfully ugly head of a man popped up between the two pairs of half-exposed breasts and gave the boy in the middle of the street a cold stare.

Kibek froze stiff. He didn't realize he had actually been *gawking* at the ladies, and apparently so much so, that he hadn't even noticed someone was buried underneath all that exposed skin. And not just any man either, but a high-ranking henchman of the Redmane family. He hurried into a bowing position and lowered his eyes to the ground. "My apologies, Mister Croc!"

"Mister Croc!" The ugly man burst into a cackling laughter. "Such outstanding manners for such a hideous creature! Good lad. Now, fuck off," he said as he waved off the boy with the back of his hand. "Wait," he quickly added as if suddenly remembering something important. "You're the cutie's older brother, ain't ya?"

"Rayne? Y-yes sir. Have you seen her?"

"Oh she passed by," Croc said, casually fondling one of the breasts next to his face. "Looked awfully lost if you ask me. Lucky for her, Lord Leo was there to help her find her way." He flashed a grin at the boy who didn't understand the underlying meaning at the time. "Now, do fuck off, child."

"Croc . . ." Raven couldn't help but to hate himself. If only he had killed the ugly bastard then and there, perhaps Dad would still be alive. But he was just a boy, and what reason did he have to attack the man at that moment?

Kibek kept his eyes on the ground and continued down the road that would eventually lead to the cliffs where his mother lay buried. He was grinding his teeth in frustration when he almost reached the borders of Ambria and still hadn't come across his baby sister. He stopped outside the terrain of the warehouse that was owned by the Redmane family. It was pretty much the only place left to check out before he would be forced to travel the desolate road to his mother's grave.

He never visited Mom since she had been laid to rest. Not once. Even thinking about it made him weep. Mom was dead. There was nothing that could bring her back. He would never create new memories with her again. Anything was better than to engage in a confrontation with the past.

"Please just wake up . . . Please just wake up . . . PLEASE . . . WAKE UP!"

"Please don't do this, my lord!"

Even right now — so far removed from the situation he was forced to witness again — the desperate cry of his baby sister plunged an ice-cold dagger straight into his heart. He didn't have to imagine what effect it had on his younger self.

"Rayne!" Kibek shouted and hopped over a fence that was twice his height. He ran across the muddy terrain until he reached the warehouse where he could hear his sister whimpering even from outside. His heart was pounding violently in his chest as he placed both hands on the steel handle. His entire vision trembled as he watched the heavy raindrops explode on his skin.

Drip . . . drip . . . drip . . .

"No . . . I don't want to see this . . ."

The door opened without a sound. He couldn't bring himself to raise his head; too terrified to find out what he would see.

"Close the fucking door, Croc! You're letting a goddamn draft in," a familiar voice reverberated across the empty hall of the warehouse.

Kibek gathered all his courage to look up, but would forever regret the decision to do so. His baby sister was bent over a table, naked as the day she was born. Her eyes were swollen and submerged in tears. Thin streams of blood trickled down her inner thighs.

Lord Leonid stood behind the scrawny little thing with his pants dropped to his ankles. He was forcing her into this position with one hand on the nape of her neck and the other one twisting her arm behind her back. He stopped thrusting his hips when 'Croc' didn't seem to heed his command. "What the fuck . . . ? Who—"

"KIBEK!"

What he would have given for a chance to erase the sound of the blood-curdling cry that was going to haunt him for the rest of his life from his memory. She cried out to him with so much agony in her voice, so much despair, he could never hear the name 'Kibek' again without thinking back on that moment.

"Forget what you have seen here tonight, Darkie Silverstone. Go home and behave. I will have your sister delivered at your doorstep before daylight."

Kibek didn't hear a single word that was said to him. Leonid's voice passed by like a whisper on a battlefield. He felt strangely disconnected from existence as if he were merely a character in a story that was told by someone else. But if that were the case, then why did everything hurt so much? Why did every particle of his body feel as if it could burst into flames at any given moment?

He screamed out in pain as a dazzling white light engulfed his entire body. A light so bright, he could sense the luminance on his skin. A light so *liberating*, it made him feel like a god; an angry, vengeful god.