

Chapter 27

PEAKS AND VALLEYS

Marcus departed from Rokhan as one of eight members in a group that was tasked to hunt down the riders he encountered almost two months ago when he blundered through the desolate desert of the Dorran. For the past week or so, he and his companions had traveled many miles across a treacherous mountain range called Vastare that separated Aedin from the northern realm and stretched from the heart of Malakhai all the way to the borders of Meralys.

The endeavor on its own was already challenging enough because of the rugged character of the terrain, but it was the unforgiving conditions of the weather that truly increased the difficulty of this expedition. Aside from a few hours of sunshine on the second day of their journey, there had been no shortage of precipitation of any kind. It almost seemed as if every celestial force in the heavens above had decided to team up just this once and shit down on them in a never-ending diarrhea of rain, sleet, hail, and snow. And as if that wasn't already taxing enough, the team had been ordered not to fall asleep for the final stretch of the journey due to the nature of the threat that Ivandor 'the Dreamwalker' posed. There had even been numerous instances where they were forced to cease their advancement and consider whether it was even safe enough to continue.

Marcus took all of that in stride, however. He remembered feeling rejuvenated just to be out and about again, and to finally be utilized in a way that suited his skillset instead of idling through the days doing absolutely fuck all inside a cramped-up little chamber. It had to be said that he did feel bad for his future mother-in-law who spent her time and dedication teaching him everything there was to know about the Malakhi culture and history, but a Bloodthorne simply wasn't made to be trapped inside a classroom. He found it increasingly difficult to care about what he deemed to be trivial when the entire realm seemed all but ready to burst like a bubble at any given moment.

So, ill weather or no, Marcus began this expedition with a brimming grin and made no effort to hide his excitement as they arduously trudged toward the top of yet another slippery mountain. At the very least, the chances were kept to a minimum that he was going to be bored to death. However, he would be lying to himself if he said that the mission didn't worry him in the slightest.

Sure, he was surrounded by some of Malakhai's most capable warriors, and King Ifra may have convinced everyone that the composition of the squad was perfectly balanced and therefore very well-suited to deal with any form of danger, but Marcus knew that assembling an effective squad was a puzzle more complex than simply making all the individual pieces fit together. A certain chemistry between teammates was needed for a squad to function efficiently and to transform the collective into something far greater than a mere sum of its parts.

Besides Zazy, Marcus wasn't terribly familiar with the other people he had to entrust his life to and that didn't sit too well with him. He had learned through experience that when operating as a unit, life-and-death situations were often decided by the squad's ability to trust one another. And right now, he was having doubts whether the team he had become a part of would be able to work together as a cohesive unit in such a scenario.

Of his seven teammates, he already knew there was one he couldn't trust to even find a grain of sand in the Dorran. Why the king decided to put his faith in that despicable woman was something that went far beyond his meager comprehension. The journey was dangerous enough without the constant need to look over his shoulder.

Marcus did have to concede that he probably would have taken much longer to find the enemy hideout on his own if he went on with his original plan of heading for Doriva to gather clues and go on from there. The abandoned city was already many days of travel behind them now. They had trodden so far into the northern wilderness that nothing could be seen besides peaks and valleys in any direction for miles on end. So, he grudgingly admitted — though not in the open of course — that Ilandra did have her uses, but unfortunately for him, she wasn't the only factor on the team that gave him a reason to doubt.

Obviously, there was the matter of another teammate traveling with them who Marcus wouldn't have taken along in a million years; a feeble-looking old man who lay folded on the back of Ilandra's horse with his hands and feet bound together like a captured fugitive. A man who looked suspiciously identical to the king of Malakhai, but was in fact none other than Damao Misomok's little pet experiment, Olly; an overweight, cream-colored cat that somehow possessed the ability to shapeshift. Very fascinating and all, but as far as Marcus was concerned, Olly was no more than a liability who couldn't be counted on in the event of a fight.

And then there was this tree trunk of a man who aptly called himself 'The Log'. Marcus didn't necessarily distrust the merry giant on the basis of the behavior he was shown so far. No, The Log had in fact been nothing but amiable toward him and even taught him a great deal about the behavior of lions for some unspoken reason. But unlike lions, humans were deceptive creatures by nature. This huge lump of meat was a bandit for crying out loud and no one ever got thrown into *Iskandhir* without a valid reason. That was what his mother always told him when he was a child: 'Don't cause any trouble or we'll lock you up in *Iskandhir* and throw away the key.'

The Log could very well be one of the most talented healers this realm had ever known — as King Ifra would have everyone believe — but there was no way of predicting his behavior once a battle ensued. Convicted criminals weren't exactly labeled as reliable even by the most optimistic standards, and Marcus' raging arousal for justice made it all but impossible to establish trust between them. Still, the giant at least made for an interesting conversation partner, unlike the hooded figure who served as this party's rearguard.

Marcus knew next to nothing about the person who introduced himself only as Senahim — which Marcus was proudly able to deduce as the Malakhi word for 'chameleon' — and even that was just a code name to conceal his true identity. Senahim had a tall, wiry frame and was draped in a black hooded cloak that covered everything above shoulders. A featureless black mask shrouded his face in darkness and further added to his enigmatic presence. Supposedly, Senahim was the top-ranking member of Malakhai's so-called 'Unseen Division' which — as the name already suggested — dealt with the nation's more *discreet* affairs.

Needless to say, Marcus found it rather ironic having to put his trust in someone who didn't even trust the group enough to reveal his own face. There was also something peculiar about Senahim's smell that Marcus couldn't quite place, but oh well, at least the shadowy figure kept to himself and didn't seem like the type who would cause harm to the team's morale. Nor would he be one to raise it, but that was beside the point.

Senahim hadn't said another word since he mumbled his name on their first day as a team, showed no interest in the rest of his companions, and never complained about anything. Senahim was simply there, almost as much as he wasn't.

The same couldn't be said about the last member Marcus hadn't met prior to this mission. Enra Efirok was the complete opposite of Senahim; constantly yapping her mouth and flapping about like some kind of inexhaustible source of energy. She was a woman in her early thirties, but had the enthusiastic sense of wonder that would make any spastic toddler seem jaded. She had short auburn hair and wore a pair of thin-framed spectacles that put an emphasis on her big bright eyes. Enra was brought along on this mission because of her capabilities as a seeker, but supposedly, she also was some kind of genius who had been working at the research facility in Vordula as an assistant to Damao Misomok for the past ten years.

It quickly became apparent to Marcus that Enra showed a great deal of interest in him. Or, perhaps more specifically, his ability to shapeshift into an animalistic murder machine. She had been studying him for the better part of their journey and whenever she wasn't bombarding him with questions about his *Garovi* state, she would be observing him from afar, writing down notes in a book she carried with her. She was constantly observing and writing, observing and writing. And not only about Marcus either. Every goddamn tree, plant, or rock they came across was reason enough for her to squeal in excitement and scribble in her book as if she had made yet another grand discovery. If it weren't for Salavor constantly reminding her not to drift too far from the group, they likely would have long considered her missing.

Marcus couldn't deny his excitement when he found out that Salavor Inkharok was also chosen as a member of this ragtag group. It instantly made him feel a whole lot more confident about the mission's

success, having heard many great things about the man who was said to be a distant relative of Aesha Celestine. Of course Marcus hadn't actually seen him fight yet, but if Salavor even possessed only half of Aesha's auric capability, he would still be counted among the upper echelon of the martial world.

However, Marcus also couldn't deny that his excitement to work alongside Salavor had somewhat dampened since they set out on this journey together. To call the Malakhi commander eccentric would be the same as calling a hurricane a bit windy. At times it seemed as though Salavor was more concerned about his lack of 'nut-busting' — and Marcus was very proud to have deduced that as another word for ejaculating — than the actual mission itself.

He didn't understand how something as insignificant as sexual intercourse could play such a huge role in some people's lives, although he did have to admit that his own 'nut-busting' business had increased tenfold since he arrived in Rokhan. And perhaps the most surprising thing about that was that he didn't even dislike it. After all, nothing aroused Marcus Bloodthorne as much as duty. There were in fact many other things he had stopped disliking ever since he made the life-changing decision to leave the familiarity of his home in Mengarovi if he really thought about it.

He started eating more vegetables. His mother would undoubtedly have been delighted by that, but if she knew how to cook like they did in Rokhan, such a thing would never have been an issue in the first place. He had begun reading a book that was written by some imaginative fellow called F. Shadowind and recommended to him by Faisel Rodebok. He hadn't finished it yet, but was almost embarrassed to admit that he was so engrossed into the story, he couldn't wait to pick up the book again. He also developed a taste for a dank-smelling weed called *woolah* and found himself lurking on a pipe every now and again to mellow out, whereas before, he couldn't stand the smell of it whenever Cato lit one up. And last but not least; he became a lot more tolerant of the existence of animals. Or maybe it was the other way around. In any case, it was quite telling that Marcus didn't even object to the suggestion of setting out on this journey on horseback.

Unfortunately, the horse he was given had slipped on a loose rock and tumbled down a cliff a couple of days ago, but that too was very much beside the point. The point was that Marcus had become a different man since he arrived in Rokhan and many of those changes could be attributed to Zazy, who demanded him to stop living his life as if it were another task he was ordered to do, and start doing things that brought him enjoyment. Of course, that was a request he had no trouble fulfilling. After all, and yet again; he was ordered to do so, and Marcus Bloodthorne was nothing if not dutiful.

"Hey! Don't you dare fall asleep!"

Marcus flinched when he felt a sudden elbow digging into his lower ribs. "I'm awake!" he hissed at no one in particular and rapidly blinked a few times to find his bearings, but when he saw that Zazy was staring at him with a foul expression as if she were deciding the fate of a lame horse, he simply pretended to have been in deep contemplation all along. "I'm awake," he repeated with a bit more dignity.

His eyes went from side to side to survey the scenery in front of him. They appeared to be standing on the summit of a mountain, looking down on a vast array of lower peaks and valleys that stretched across the entire horizon, but he wasn't able to recall the climb to the top at all. Somewhere along the way he must have sunken too far into his thoughts somehow.

The idea that he might have fallen asleep sent a violent shockwave throughout his body that filled every blood vessel inside of him with adrenaline. Ever since Ilandra told everyone not to fall asleep, the days had started to blend together like one big, hazy dream. However, it would seem that Marcus was the only one in the group who suffered from the consequences of a lack of sleep.

His teammates — with a lone exception of the masked enigma called Senahim — were all chewing on *khauka* leaves to stay awake. The plant was often used by people from Malakhai and Kyogun as a stimulant, but unlike the *woolah* that Marcus loved to smoke nowadays, *khauka* didn't seem to affect a *Garovi* in the slightest. It meant that he had to find other means to maintain his sharpness, but luckily, self-preservation proved to be far more effective than any remedy he could consume. Reminding himself of the fact that Ivandor Nostram was able to manipulate the mind of even a *Garovi* through dreams forced him to think about Uncle Mason and Cousin Maynard, and that subsequently fueled him with enough rage to regain his focus.

"Are we there yet?" Marcus hated himself for being *that* guy and asking such an infantile question out loud as he was used to taking the lead and knowing exactly where to go his entire life, but they had been traveling for quite a while already and didn't seem anywhere close to reaching a destination of any kind. And the longer they traveled, the more suspicious he started to become regarding the true motives of the one who guided them through the wilderness.

Ilandra showed him a teasing smile as if she could already guess his thoughts. "As a matter of fact, yes. I'm surprised you even have to ask, darling. Aren't you supposed to be the scout who is tasked with sniffing out the scent of our enemy with his snout? I sincerely hope you weren't snoozing through your duty, dear."

"I was made to believe my job here was exclusively to make people bleed. Isn't there a seeker amongst us who is supposed to act as our scout?"

Ilandra shifted her golden eyes to the side where a woman with short auburn hair was poking a small ground-dwelling creature with a stick. "Can't you see that Enra has more important things to do? Now, be a good little boy and tell me where you think the hideout is."

Marcus answered with a guttural sound and did as he was told by scanning the horizon once again, but with the heavy downpour that had been going on for days already, he wasn't able to pick up any distinctive scents at all. He shrugged. "As far as I can tell, you're leading us to absolutely nowhere."

"Do I really need to do everything myself?" Ilandra sighed and casually flicked a finger toward a seemingly random spot on the horizon. "There."

Marcus hardly made an effort to follow her finger, and instead, kept his eyes fixed on the raven-haired witch. Even though he couldn't sense abnormalities within her physiology that might indicate any form of deception, his instincts still warned him that she was hiding something significant from the group. "I don't trust you."

"So you keep telling me."

"What exactly can we expect to find *there*?" Zazy asked and gave Marcus another nudge with an elbow that told him to behave. It wasn't that she had any confidence in this vile woman who was at least partially responsible for the death of her oldest sister, but she did trust her grandfather's judgment even above her own. And if Pappy concluded that Ilandra could be used to gain the upper hand in their conflict with Cain Everlong and his cohorts, then Zazy would be willing to set aside any grievances.

"Who knows? I have been separated from them for weeks. It's not like I have a blueprint of their master plan committed to memory or anything."

"*Tanto kanushi . . .*" Zazy muttered under her breath. "How do you know they're even still there?"

"Oh, they're there, dear. Of course it is entirely possible they temporarily went out for an errand or two, but sooner or later, they always return to the same hideout. As long as Amon Everlong still breathes, they won't leave Aedin."

Marcus remembered his uncle telling him about the grandmaster's illness. Thinking that it must have been the doing of Cain Everlong — or at least one of his allies — he leaped forward in a flash and forcefully snatched Ilandra by the collar, effortlessly lifting her from the ground and holding her entire body over the cliff. "Is *that* their goal? To murder Grandmaster Amon?" He paused to glance down at his own neck when he felt the cold steel of a blade prickling his skin.

"It's best not to do anything rash, Lord Marcus."

"You're fast, Lord Salavor."

"Mmm. I also have the means to kill a *Garovi* if need be."

Marcus snickered. "Are you sure about that?"

"I guess it depends on how long you think you can hold your breath. Truthfully, I'm not too eager to find out, so let's just calm down and—"

"Incredible!" Seemingly oblivious to the tension, Enra rushed over to her teammates and eagerly ran her fingers over Marcus' arms like a connoisseur at a museum admiring the work of a master sculptor. "Even without your transformation, you possess the strength of a monster! Oh, you *must* allow me to thoroughly examine your body once we find ourselves a suitable location to do so! I simply insist! Say—" and she excitedly flicked her chin toward the giant healer who stood a bit farther away and was pensively staring at the distant horizon with a strangely sentimental look on his weathered face. "—do you suppose you can lift him up with the same ease?"

The Log slowly turned his head and raised a single eyebrow. "I've fought many Garovi in my life. Never been lifted off my feet like a damn twig."

"You what?!" Marcus blurted out in surprise, but was forced to divert his attention back to the woman he still held over the cliff.

"One thing at a time, darling. I do believe you were in the process of deciding my fate. Please don't take too long now, will you? We're kind of on a tight schedule here."

"Samyo," Zazy said and put a careful hand on Marcus' shoulder. "We can deal with her later, yeah?"

Marcus gnashed his teeth and growled. So, apparently, even Zazy thought he went overboard, which probably meant that he really did act too rashly. But he never liked leaving any business unfinished and didn't seem willing to back down just yet.

"Why don't you be a good little boy and listen to your mistress, darling?"

"Not before you tell me why they want the grandmaster dead."

"If you insist." Ilandra lit up a devious smile before suddenly dissipating into a puff of smoke and rematerializing next to Marcus. "Amon Everlong has an old debt that is still left unsettled," she said while swatting Salavor's sword out of her face. "Once one of the *red birds* reclaim what they perceive to be rightfully theirs, they can finally proceed with the next phase of their plan."

"What do you mean, *one* of the red birds? That girl back then in the Dorran; I saw her crumble to a pile of dust. Are you saying there are more people like her?" Even saying it out loud was enough to give Marcus an intense feeling of dread.

"Well, not exactly more people *like* her. Valyse is every female member of the Everlong clan. Or she has the power to be anyway. I'm not entirely sure about the specifics. The girl you saw dying in the Dorran was simply one of the vessels Valyse possessed."

"How is that even possible?"

"Oh, I guess it's similar to the abilities of Master Damao then," Enra chimed in with an absolute lack of enthusiasm in her voice and waved off a wink from Ilandra for getting it right.

"What? But there isn't a single female member of the Everlong clan still living?"

Ilandra scoffed. "That's why you should never make assumptions based on ignorance."

Marcus didn't even know what to say to that, but heard a heartbeat beside him that immediately began to pick up pace. "Anything you want to share with the rest of us, Lord Salavor?"

"Only speculations," Salavor answered dryly as he sheathed his sword back into the scabbard.

"And?"

"Mmm, I was wondering if that was why Lady Maya seemed possessed back in Doriva. Not to mention why she was able to understand that cryptic script."

Marcus curled his lip in disgust. He had only recently learned from his uncle that Maya wasn't his true sister. Not that he genuinely believed what he had been told, but it was enough to sow a seed of uncertainty that steadily sprouted into a thorny growth of doubt. "Maya is not an Everlong . . ." he mumbled quietly as if he had lost all strength to speak.

"Maybe her baby is," The Log casually suggested and was pierced with a look of absolute contempt from Marcus. "What? The purty birdy is preggo with the eggo."

"That doesn't make any sense!"

"The *beautiful lady* is *pregnant* with an *egg*," The Log said slowly and clearly and even threw in some extra emphasis on a couple of words so that the short-fused idiot didn't have to implode from thinking too much.

"It does," Zazy said, very much to the dismay of her betrothed. "You know that Cozza Cato has the Everlong blood in him, right? So if he somehow got Maya pregnant — which wouldn't be completely unreasonable to think — I would say that it might very well be the reason how she could be influenced by Valyse."

Marcus stared blankly at his future spouse for a few good seconds as if she just told him that water wasn't wet. "Are you seriously suggesting that Valyse has the means to manipulate my sister through her hypothetical unborn child?"

"Yes, yes," Ilandra said with a clap of her hands to draw everyone's attention. "I know it can be so thrillingly exciting to speculate on matters we won't find answers to, but purely speaking for myself, I

personally cannot wait to get out of the rain and take a nice, hot bath. So, now that we have finished our precious moment of bonding, let's proceed with what we came here to do, shall we?"

Marcus only responded with a grunt and turned away from the group to sulk at the horizon. This whole conversation had him filled with a hunger for destruction and he couldn't wait for the opportunity to vent his belligerence. At least he didn't have to worry about falling asleep anymore.

"Alright," Salavor said with an exhausted sigh. "Let's go over the plan again and be done with it already."