

Chapter 30

TOUGH MEAT

Marcus stretched out his arms and unleashed an uninhibited yawn as if he had just awoken from the best night of sleep he had ever had. A satisfied moan immediately followed, signaling to the entire world just how well-rested and revitalized he felt. He was ready to fire a second yawn, but suddenly froze into position when it dawned on him that he wasn't at the comfort of his home in Mengarovi anymore. Then he remembered being somewhere in the northern outskirts of Aedin where he was sent on a mission to capture the enemy for interrogation. And then he remembered that they had already found the hideout and that a fight may or may not have taken place. And then . . . nothing; only a blissfully dreamless sleep.

"What happened?" he asked with the gravity of someone who just arrived at an unexpected funeral when he noticed that a few members from his team were staring at him with noticeable tension on their faces.

"Samyo, how are you feeling?" Zazy asked with a hint of concern in her voice and put a comforting hand on Marcus' arm as if to prepare him for some terrible news.

"I'm fine, *samyan*," Marcus answered with similar caution. "Can you please tell me what the hell is going—" His eyes fell on a bald man wrapped up in a white hooded cloak sitting half a dozen yards away, and he managed to piece together the puzzle on his own. It then came to his attention that some of his teammates were missing. He turned as white as a sheet before the blood inside his veins began to boil and reddened his face with rage. "What have you done to me?!" he growled and rushed toward the tied-up captive.

"Sit back down!" The voice of Salavor barked at him as if rebuking a misbehaving dog.

Marcus could be as stubborn as a mule, but it was in his nature to respect authority and adhere to the rigidity of hierarchy. He turned around to face the Malakhi commander with a contemptuous snarl, but his belligerence instantly watered down to a pool of confusion when he saw that Salavor was being carried in the arms of The Log.

"You have already caused enough trouble," Salavor said and motioned at the healer to put him down.

Without pause, The Log freed his hands and let the Malakhi commander flop to the ground like a pile of dirty laundry.

"*Dom Mala, khumar chorro* . . . My legs . . ." Salavor groaned.

"Ah, fantastic; you can feel pain again. Congratulations, I am very happy for you. It is a good sign of recovery indeed! Let's see that fucko, Nia Seraphine or what have ya, top that performance then, eh?"

"What . . .?" Marcus groaned in bewilderment and further submerged himself in heavy confusion upon hearing his mother's name. "Have I—" he began when he saw Salavor's pitiful state, but wasn't sure how to delicately put into words what he wanted to ask. "—hurt you?"

"No," Salavor mumbled, still with his face flat on the ground. "Couldn't feel a damn thing, in fact."

"I'm . . . sorry . . ."

"Is that a question?" It looked like a monumental effort, but Salavor finally managed to flip himself over and immediately began to fill the chamber of his pipe with a new supply of *woolah*. "Anyway, as our mutual friend loves to throw in at any given possibility: 'Don't say sorry unless you have something to apologize for.' I bet you can't even remember what happened, can you?"

"We won. That's what happened," Zazy said and flicked her chin to their captive. "Anything else is of no importance."

"That's easy for you to say, Your Highness. My cock hurts like hell."

"You're welcome," The Log said with a brimming grin.

"Venereal disease," Zazy mumbled.

"Oh, don't mind me. Please continue," Enra said and resumed scribbling in her book when Marcus turned to her as if she were the only sane person left.

Marcus curled his lip when it became clear that the seeker was sketching a ridiculously accurate drawing of a monstrous bipedal creature looming menacingly over what appeared to be a pipe-smoking Lord Salavor. There was no question what — or perhaps more specifically, *who* — the hairy monster was supposed to represent, but he couldn't help wondering if he was in fact still dreaming. Nothing seemed to make any sense. "Where are the others?" he asked even though he possessed multiple options to discover the answer himself.

"Oh sure, let's just skip the part where I forgive you for your rampage that's left me crippled down the waist."

"Good idea, Sally. No one wants to hear you talk anyway." Zazy wrapped an arm around Marcus and pointed at a lone figure in the distance that made any inanimate statue seem lively. "Well, there's Senahim making a big fuss about everything as usual." She tilted her head toward the entrance of the cave. "Ilandra . . . or Damao — I don't even know what to call him . . . or her anymore — is in there collecting some stuff and getting dressed or some shit." Her finger then went to the double-goer of her grandfather who lay asleep under a spruce. "And Olly is sleeping right over there."

"Olly pretending!" The counterfeit king shouted back and vented his annoyance with a huff before curling into a ball again.

Marcus felt a wave of relief wash over him. He blew a sigh into the overcast sky and noticed that it had even stopped raining. Everything seemed to have worked out in the end. Surely, the road ahead was going to be smooth sailing from now on. "I'm glad nobody got hurt," he said, even though he couldn't deny that his pride certainly suffered some damage for numerous reasons.

"Again, while I wasn't hurt in the most literal sense of the word—"

"Arrash *khum boy*! Will you shut your fucking face already, Sally?" Zazy flicked her chin to their captive again. "We still have plenty of time to make *someone* hurt."

"Oh, come on. I already surrendered," Ivandor groaned in his gruff voice and continued muttering some sort of prayer under his breath.

"Who defeated him anyway?" Marcus realized with every passing second how utterly useless he must have been to his team. No, not just useless; he would have forgiven himself if it were only that. Assuming he pieced the puzzle correctly, it would likely be the case that he had even been a massive liability. Not in a million years would he have seen himself as this team's weakest link with Olly being a distant second, but the truth was painfully clear; he had let his team down.

"Take a wild guess, darling," Ilandra whispered in Marcus' ear as she materialized from a puff of smoke beside him.

Marcus winced and eyed the woman who was now dressed as if she had been invited to some royal court as an important whore of honor. So not only did she not betray the team as he thought she would, but judging from everyone's lack of protest, she actually even saved the day. "You?"

Ilandra theatrically covered her lips with a few fingers and laughed. "Why so surprised, dear?"

"I just can't get over the fact you're actually Damao Misomok."

"How's that? Is it because you thought that the one hundred and fifty-six year old Damao Misomok actually looks like a pubescent boy? Don't be daft, precious. Say, you—" and she waved a lazy hand at the Malakhi princess, "—What does Damao Misomok look like to you?"

Zazy bared her teeth to express her dismay at the lack of respect being shown to her, but she also knew that Damao even behaved that way in front of her grandfather. "Like a miserable old scrotum with a face."

"Ah yes, I believe that was my third skin; Hebi Ohkunsok. Such a shame he burned to a crisp in that awful lab explosion." Ilandra shrugged and nonchalantly nudged Salavor's knee with a foot. "And you; who is Damao Misomok to you?"

Salavor grinned at her, but the expression he gave had just about every quality of a painful grimace instead. "Scrotum sounds about right," he said through clenched jaws. "Mmm, and a few years of that plumpy neurotic fellow as well."

"Fine. You have made your point," Marcus groaned. "It still doesn't make it any easier to accept this particular . . . *skin* as Damao Misomok."

"Then call me Ilandra if it makes you happier. I don't see myself changing skins any time soon anyway. She is too much *fun*."

Marcus winced and slowly inched away from her as if she carried a contagious disease. "I think we should start interrogating our captive."

"Oh, now you want to act like a big boy and be helpful," Ilandra teased with a healthy dose of condescension and laughed off the cold stare she received in the process. "Go back to sleep, poppet. The adults have already done most of the work."

Marcus frowned and began to feel even more useless than he did only a few seconds ago. "How long have I slept?"

Zazy scoffed as though agreeing with Marcus' inner thoughts. "Half a day or so. We could have woken you up, but you just looked too cute all wrapped up inside my cloak." She leaned in and pinched his cheek, joining in on Ilandra's tease.

"So I missed out on pretty much everything . . ."

"Only the parts that mattered," Ilandra said.

"Well, I certainly noticed your presence," Salavor grumbled through a thick puff of smoke.

"Oh, poor you," Zazy grumbled back.

"Yes, poor me," Salavor growled, but contained himself from throwing in an insult as well. Unlike Damao Misomok, he at the very least always addressed the royal family with the proper respect. "Now pour me another," he then said to The Log who was taking a big swig from a flask filled with questionable contents.

"Nope," the giant healer said. "Any more and it will be detrimental to your recovery." He slapped Salavor's hand away and took another greedy gulp from the flask.

"Is that the truth?"

The Log pulled a face and shrugged. "It could be."

"Anyway," Zazy said and petted Marcus' bare thigh. "Now we're heading for Nimos, *samyō*."

"Knee . . . Moss . . .?" Marcus repeated as if learning to talk for the first time.

"That's the name of the northern realm," Enra chimed in absently and flipped through her book until she landed on a particular page. "Here, that's you, by the way. It's nothing special; just a quick doodle."

Marcus winced at a charcoal drawing of him curled up into a cloak like a new-born babe, but simultaneously couldn't help admiring the near lifelike quality of what Enra called 'a quick doodle'.

"So, does anyone feel like . . . filling . . . me—" he began, but trailed off as he said it when his eyes fell on a part of the drawing that looked suspiciously akin to a massively manly bulge below his lower abdomen. "—in on the specifics?"

"Oh, I will fill you," Salavor mumbled through a dank haze.

Zazy cackled in a way that would have made her grandfather proud. "Really, Sal? Will it even work again once you've recovered?"

Salavor turned pale as a corpse. It would appear he never even considered such blasphemous thoughts as a possibility. And just like that, Salavor showed everyone how to condense the very essence of sadness into a single expression.

"You'll be fine," The Log said confidently, but murmured a disclaimer of some sorts under his breath that should free him from any guilt if it turned out to be otherwise.

"Hello?!" Marcus asked annoyedly when he felt that his question was already getting shoved under a rug of idle conversation.

"You're so needy," Ilandra said and twirled a wrist at the assistant of her other half. "Tell him, Enra."

"Right," the four-eyed scientist said and nudged her glasses a bit higher on the bridge of her nose. She then flipped her book to another page and started summarizing the notes she had scribbled earlier. "So we are going to Nimos, but I guess we have already established that. Let's see . . . Ah, yes. Our first stop will be at a village called Seeji—"

"It's Seeji," The Log corrected her even though it sounded exactly the same.

"Seeji?"

"No, Seeji."

"That is exactly what I said; Seeji."

"For the last time; it's Seeji."

Enra calmly took off her glasses and fogged them with her breath before wiping them clean with a sleeve of her cloak. "Please allow me to perform an autopsy on you when you die. I wish to study your brain and unfold the mysteries hidden within."

"You're cute when you do the thing you just did."

Marcus groaned. "So, we're going to Seeji—"

"Ahh, perfect pronunciation."

Marcus drew a deep and conscious breath with his eyes closed. "—Then what?"

Enra didn't give an immediate answer, but instead kept her eyes on the giant numbskull while bobbing her head up and down as if she already started dissecting him in her mind. This went on for long enough to even make The Log a bit uncomfortable, but lucky for him, she concluded her reverie with a wink and a smile. "We are going to free the members of the alliance from captivity, obviously."

"They are held captive?" Marcus scoffed and shook his head as if he had just been told the world's dumbest joke. "So, let me get this straight; you're telling me that the likes of Mykon Bloodthorne, Rahziel Mantarok, and Aesha Celestine are locked away in some kind of prison?"

"Precisely!" Enra answered enthusiastically. "That's quite an achievement, wouldn't you say?"

"No, it's fucking ridiculous!" Marcus almost spat out the words and looked around expecting to see everyone agreeing with him, but when it appeared that he was the only one who seemed to find the claim incredibly stupid, he once again began to wonder if Ivandor somehow still got a hold of his mind. "How?!"

"The prison where our friends are being held captive is guarded by members of the Tomoki tribe," Ilandra said in her assistant's stead when it became clear that the eccentric scientist had lost all interest in the conversation and already began scribbling in her book again.

"Fucking Tomoki," The Log growled and emptied the remainder of his drink in one single go. He then belched in what sounded like a roar and flung the flask over the cliff. "Cockless cowards."

"And now, they — along with a few other tribes — have allied themselves with Rezador to form a coalition of malevolence."

The Log snickered and waved a hand in front of his face as if Ilandra's words carried a foul stench. "Tomoki, Guaifong, Yuwi, Vakiri; all of them a bunch of rancid cunts. And don't even get me started on—" He paused for a moment to regard Marcus with a contemplative frown and ultimately finished his thoughts with a wide grin. "Nah. You're alright."

Marcus frowned back and had no idea what the healer exactly meant by that, but it didn't seem important enough to extend that line of conversation for now so he turned to Ilandra instead. "It doesn't really explain how those Tomoki people are able to keep some of Aedin's strongest warriors locked up."

"Oh darling, there is so much about Nimos you don't understand. Members from the Tomoki tribe possess a technique that nullifies anyone's ability to draw aura from their surroundings. Working as a collective, they have created an arcane sphere that contains the entirety of Naraka — that's the name of the prison — within their bubble of impotence."

"So, all we have to do is take out the Tomoki then."

"Well, yes, if you simply disregard the Guaifong, the Yuwi, the Vakiri, the Garovi—"

"The *what*?!"

"I wasn't finished yet. The nation of Wudan and the nation of Ko—"

"Don't forget about the army of mercenaries that you yourself have gathered," Ivandor muttered in between his prayers.

"If I have gathered them myself, their loyalty obviously lies with me, Vanny. Now stop interrupting—"

"Do not pretend you haven't heard me, goddammit!" Marcus hissed and grabbed Ilandra by the wrist. "What do you mean, 'the Garovi'?" The question almost left his lips as a menacing growl.

Ilandra smirked as her eyes made their way down and then up again. "You certainly do grab just about every opportunity to lay your hands on me. Don't you, honey?"

"Answer the question."

"What, did you honestly think that the Bloodthornes were the only Garovi in the world? Darling, I would have assumed that you know your family history considering how much the Bloodthornes love the smell of their own farts. Let's see; from what I've learned at Aethelwomb all those years ago, I believe it was Mordecai who came from the north to settle down in a place that had once been called Gallow Woods—"

"I know my family history," Marcus growled through gritted teeth and let go of Ilandra's wrist. "I just never thought any further beyond that."

"Brave of you to admit your ignorance."

"Yeah! Well done, pup," The Log said and gave Marcus a clap on the back out of sheer respect.

Marcus winced. "And they sided with Rezador?"

Ilandra nodded with her eyes closed. "It's only natural to side with the winning team. Not every Garovi embodies the virtues of a Bloodthorne, dear. Anyway, let's wrap up this little chit-chat and get down to business, alright?" She walked over to their captive who had just finished murmuring his prayers. Her fingers turned black and hardened to sharp blades like scalpels made from obsidian.

"Wait. What about my sis—" Marcus hated himself for having to hesitate, but he couldn't turn back now. "What about Maya?" he asked instead. "Has she also been taken to Naraka?"

Ilandra tapped her lips and raised her eyes to the sky. "Hmm, now that's a good question. I don't believe we have covered that topic yet. Have we, Vanny?"

"We have."

"Yes, of course we have. Do we look like a bunch of amateurs to you, Marcus Bloodthorne? No, don't answer that. With Olly and Enra in our midst, it's better to leave the truth unspoken."

"Olly heard that!"

"Oh, who cares?!"

"What happened to my sister, goddammit?!"

Ilandra lit up a smirk. "Maya is a lost cause."

"Say that again," Marcus growled in what sounded more demonic than human and bared his fangs that were steadily growing into daggers.

"Valyse controls her now," Ilandra stated matter-of-factly, completely unfazed by the threatening look she received. "The only way to release her from the clutches of Valyse is death."

Marcus had nothing to say in return, but showed everyone how he thought about that by letting out a deafening roar. Without knowing how to convert his emotions into words, he spun around and threw an arm over his head. Not long thereafter, one of the mountaintops went missing from the horizon. "FUCK!" he screamed in an attempt to still express himself through civilized speech.

"Anyway," Ilandra said and gave her former comrade a peculiar look as if to apologize for the delay. "Any last words, Vanny?"

Ivandor looked up with eyes that seemed ready to finally get some rest. "I hope I taste just as good as I look, you vile witch."

Ilandra chuckled. "What, just like your son, you mean?" And without granting Ivandor the final word, she pierced his chest like a needle going through wool. Blood dripped down from the corners of her lips as she shredded the still-beating heart with her teeth. Nobody wanted to witness this rather unholy ritual, but they were all staring at the gory spectacle wearing various expressions on their faces.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Zazy said and covered her mouth, but never thought about dragging her eyes away.

"Oh, you really have found the perfect skin, Master Damao. Good for you," Enra said giddily while sketching the scene in front of her without looking at her drawing.

"Mmm, tough meat," Salavor said, lying on his back with his head turned to the side and a pipe between his teeth.

"I will find a way to save my sister," Marcus growled under his breath; probably not even processing what was happening before him.

"Is anyone else getting aroused?" The Log asked and slid a hand down his pants.