

Chapter 40

FINAL DESTINATION

They pretty much continued the rest of their journey in silence. The chance encounter with the Malakhi merchant named Miro Bunrahok had given them all plenty to think about.

Rayne was wondering what the death of Rosales Whiteshade the Third meant for her and Raven. The late queen – with considerable persuasion from her Ambrian vassal, Wolfe Redmane – had labeled them accomplices in the sudden disappearance of Leonid Redmane over six years ago. Due to a lack of a corpse or even any concrete evidence, they were never actively pursued for their crimes and brought to justice, but their status as renegades meant that they could never set foot again on the lands where their parents had been laid to rest.

Their ties with Cato Knight only complicated the matter even further as the late queen had declared the Onyran lord an honorless, untrustworthy, louse of a man for having the audacity to annul his arrangement with Princess Willow without any reason or notice. And now, in a little over a month, the princess who got stood up, was to become queen. And Cato would have been crowned king if he never made the stop in Ambria before visiting the royal court.

Rayne had always felt guilty for being the one to change the course of Cato's destiny. She had no doubt that he would have been a great ruler. If only she never took the short way home that night. She cast a pensive glance at Cato and offered him an apology in silence, but when she received a gentle smile in return, all she could think of was how lucky she was to have been blessed with such amazing brothers.

She leaned back and looked up to a face that was absently lost within thoughts of his own. She gave Raven a kiss on the chin and closed her eyes for a quick nap.

Raven snapped out of his reverie and looked down in surprise, but saw that Rayne was already halfway past the gates of 'Sleepy Town'. He always envied her ability to fall asleep instantaneously and gave her a kiss on her head, holding her tighter in his arms. He, too, had been thinking about the implications of Queen Rosa's death. But unlike Rayne, the majority of his thoughts went to the coronation of her successors.

Raven never lingered for too long in the past. Memories of his life in Ambria only made his heart weep, and memories before that time were nothing but a dream he had long forgotten. Despite never having met the man, the knowledge of Jackdaw Blackshaw's existence planted a seed of doubt in him that quickly sprouted and spread across every single thought in his mind.

For the first time ever, he began to question who he was before he became Kibek Silverstone, son of Finn Silverstone and Heather Reddawn. He began wondering what it meant to be *lubora*. Cato said that it meant 'crown prince', but crown prince of what, exactly? Or better yet, where? It couldn't have been any of the seven nations of Aedin as Cato told him that he could count the number of people he had met across the realm with such dark skin complexion on a single hand.

So that could only mean that Raven was the crown prince of a nation in the Unknown Realm. And what would that mean for his future? Was he really expected to wear the crown of a nation he had never heard of? Could that really be the reason why Jackdaw – who was set to become the king of Meralys himself – was looking for him? Even if he did acknowledge his position as the crown prince, and somehow ascended to the position of a king; could he really leave his sister and brother behind to sit on a throne that was as foreign to him as he himself was to the people of Aedin? And last but not least; as the king of a nation in the Unknown Realm, would he have to answer to the supposed emperor, Cain Everlong?

All the questions were starting to make his head spin. He forced himself to think of something that would make him happy, and for some completely unrelated reason, ended up with the image of a naked Aesha Celestine doing unspeakable things to him that even made his mind blush. He immediately shook off the thoughts and cast his eyes on Cato to offer an apology in silence. But why should he? Cato already had his arms wrapped around the woman who brought him happiness. And so, he, too, decided that he had

earned a moment of pleasure and returned to the fantasy that lit up his demeanor, mellowed his heart, and hardened his flesh. But only as a means to distract him from his other thoughts of course.

Maya noticed the brief glance she received from Raven. She didn't know what the peculiar expression meant, but realized how fortunate Cato was for having such a supportive friend and brother in Raven. If only she had such luck with her own brother, who may think that he was an expert in concealing his true feelings, but had in fact been as transparent to her as a glass of water. She knew that Marcus despised the notion of her being together with Cato. He always hated that whenever he returned home from Aethelwomb during holiday breaks, the first thing she would ask wasn't how he was doing, but rather how Cato was doing. She couldn't help it. Ever since she met him at the infirmary over ten years ago, she had been obsessed with the boy who saw her as a goddess.

Her eyes inadvertently trailed off to the severed head of the monstrous creature that was wrapped up in Valyse's blood-soaked robe and chained to the chestnut stallion called Chester like an anchor. She couldn't erase the moment from her mind when Valyse called her 'Ava'. She also couldn't forget the moment in *Val Roka* when Cato called the Holy Goddess 'Ava Seraphine'. She didn't understand what it meant, but it did her no good trying to recreate a rainbow with only two colors of paint. She needed more to work with, and if Cato wasn't able to give her what she wanted to know, she would have to prise them from the lips of Valyse herself.

She gasped when she felt a sudden finger brush a strand of hair behind her ear. The gesture immediately brought peace to her mind and she told herself that anything but the present was but a waste of time to think about. She took his hand and guided it to her lips. For the moment, she decided that she didn't care about Ava anymore.

Cato said nothing. Words would only desecrate the purity of the moment. There were many important things that could – and perhaps even should – occupy his mind, but all he could think of was something his master once told him when he was young. He may not be able to repeat it in the same exact words – as his master had a way with words he could only dream of – but the most important takeaway was that no matter how much a river would twist and turn, it would always find its way to the sea. And that was precisely what he felt like in the presence of Maya. He had already experienced the river's twists in the form of Willow Whiteshade even though he still hadn't even met her yet. He had drifted through the turns of his destiny in the shape of Aesha Celestine's curves. And now, the current had guided him to the sea. There wasn't a shred of doubt in his mind; Maya Bloodthorne was his final destination.

Somehow, it felt as if the outcome had been written in the stars long before he was born. He couldn't help wondering if Grandmaster Amon, Master Mykon, and Master Nia had already foreseen this reality, and by putting Maya under his care, simply nudged him into the right direction. Whatever the reason may have been to put them together didn't matter in the slightest. All he cared about was the fact that they were together. She was the flame that removed all darkness from his heart. With her by his side, he felt strong enough to withstand any hardship life could throw at him.

He tightened his arms around her to let her know how much she meant to him. He rested his cheek on her head and turned to the side, knowing full well that Marcus had been glancing at them for the better part of the past few hours. He smiled; not as a taunt, but simply to express joy.

Marcus may have already shed the malice from his eyes, but he still felt very conflicted at the sight. On one hand, he knew the danger of Cato's aura like no other. The death of Minari Oniyume was a tragedy that should never be forgotten. And even though he was surprised to see the auric control when Dhasun Vizesok's fate was discussed, he still feared that Cato was always just one small misstep removed from tumbling down a never-ending pit of darkness. But on the other hand, he had never seen either of them so happy. And despite their constant bickering, he did consider Cato his closest friend, having suffered through tribulations together which in turn forged a bond strong enough to outlast many lifetimes.

He wasn't glancing at them to secretly wish misfortune upon their relationship. Not anymore. He was peeking every now and then to learn from their interactions. From their seemingly insignificant, delicate touches, to the way they were able to say so many things with just a single glance of the eyes; the gestures reminded him just how inept he was at the game of romance. And every minute that passed by was another minute closer to meeting the woman with whom he would spend the rest of his life.

The more he allowed himself to think about the prospect, the more he realized it was actually about to become reality. He could even feel his skin tingling as the city wall of Rokhan grew bigger and bigger in front of his eyes until he wasn't able to view the entire structure without twisting his neck.

Rokhan stood out in the middle of a barren landscape like a lone star in an otherwise dark night sky. It was an enormous city full of many tall, industrious buildings, all encapsulated within a walled octagon. At the heart of the city stood a gargantuan structure that rose to the sky like a man-made mountain. *Boroka*, or 'the king of castles' in the Malakhi tongue. It wasn't very hard to imagine why it was called that way. *Boroka* had the appearance of being indestructible. From the immense size that made Ashencat look like a cozy cottage in comparison, to the intimidating rigidity of the black basalt walls; the castle was an architectural masterpiece, made to showcase the ingenuity of Malakhi engineering, as well as the unyielding tenacity of the Malakhi builders.

As they were nearing the city walls, more and more travelers started to share the road with them. Most of the people they came across were merchants that had traveled from all imaginable corners of the known world to do business in Rokhan. Not surprising, as Malakhai's capital city was Aedin's largest trading hub thanks to its geographical advantage. It was near impossible to cross the realm without passing through Rokhan along the way. And the road had become so crowded by the time the city border was reached, they actually had to wait in a queue to enter the city.

"State your name, purpose, and duration of your stay," one of the three guards who sat at a long desk said when they were finally the next in line after having waited for nearly an hour. He was a young man that was probably around the same age as Rayne. Like most Malakhs, he had a bronze skin tone and dark hair color. Despite his youthful appearance, he emanated more authority than the two senior guards sitting beside him combined. When an answer wasn't given within a few seconds, he looked up from his quill and papers with a stone-cold gaze. He removed his spectacles and held his eyes on Cato who had all the physical characteristics of a Malakhi citizen. "*Sene si Malakh?*" he asked and glanced at the other members of the party.

"No," Cato answered in the common tongue. He was so used to hearing that specific question whenever he visited Malakhai, his response came out as an automatic reflex. "Onyran," he added as a courtesy.

The young guard snickered and returned his eyes to the stack of papers in front of him. "Name, purpose, duration."

Cato sucked his teeth and sighed. For some reason, he seemed unwilling to give the guard any of the requested information.

But Marcus — having already lost his last bit of patience when he was waiting in line and kept hearing other people mumble to each other about how much he stank — placed his hands on the table, close enough to the stack of papers to prompt the young guard to look up again. "Good day. Marcus Bloodthorne. Betrothal to Zaphyra Mantarok, King Ifra Baratok's youngest granddaughter. Indefinite," he said with a military efficiency of which he was sure the young guard could appreciate.

The young guard filled in the columns without a change of expression on his face. He held his eyes on the sheet of paper and pointed his quill at the chestnut stallion. "What's that?"

"A political matter," Cato hurriedly stepped in to answer the question. "We seek an audience with your king."

"Right. That would be your purpose," the guard said as he filled in an empty slot of the middle column. "Name and duration?"

"Oh, I do like your diligence, *dom Malakhi hieso*," Cato said with a cheesy grin. "How about you tell me your name, huh? Maybe I can get your superior to give you a promotion for doing such a fine and thorough job."

"Brother," Raven whispered, making sure to go along with Cato by not using his name. "Why not just tell him what he wants to know?"

"It's complicated," Cato whispered back. Hearing Raven call him brother for the first time brought a genuine grin to his face.

"Tell me that's not who I think it is!" a woman yelled from beyond the gate. "Is that you, Cato Knight?!" And right as she said his name, everyone in the overcrowded passageway turned their attention to the Onyran party.

Cato pinched the bridge of his nose and chewed his lip in a grimace. A collective murmur made the gatehouse sound like a massive beehive that rapidly escalated to a ruckus of hysteric proportions. Some people started clapping while others were chanting his name. A rare few even shouted 'hero' at him.

Marcus let a high-pitched chuckle fly out of his mouth. "Are you fucking kidding me with this shit? What the hell is going on?" It felt as if he had tumbled into some kind of surreal fever dream all of the sudden.

"What did you do, Cay?" Raven asked in surprise, not sure whether to be amazed or unnerved by the bizarre situation. He had traveled with Cato to Malakhai on multiple occasions, but never experienced such a grandiose reception before. Although he did have to admit that this was the first time he had been to Rokhan.

Cato, still half-buried inside his palm, shook his head with his eyes closed. "It's best to just ignore this, Raven, and if you're somehow unable to do that, I want you to pretend none of this nonsense ever happened at all."

"Oh, but I will wring some answers out of you," Maya said teasingly, seemingly the only one in the party who was able to find humor in the situation.

"Move! move! Everybody, move the fuck out of my way!" the woman shouted as she waded through the cheering crowd as if she were swimming against a powerful current. Her lexicon of Malakhi expletives expanded exponentially as she came closer. The colorful words grew louder and much more graphic as she shoved the travelers to the sides of the narrow gateway. "*Mala, Mala!* Everyone's gone mad," she said, wiping her forehead with a grunt. "So it really is you." One of her eyebrows went up in an arch. "Have you done something with your hair?"

The young guard immediately sprang up from his seat and petrified to a statuesque salutation. "Captain!"

The other two guards just lazily waved their hands without looking up from their books. "Cap," they said in unison.

The captain ignored her subordinates and glared at the travelers from Onyra with a demeanor that could easily be interpreted in multiple ways. Her big, bright eyes bore the colors of Malakhai; an emerald pool flecked with shimmers of gold. Or, as Cato would rather say: 'the colors of a lush forest getting swallowed by the fury of a wildfire'. Her mahogany hair was woven into a single thick braid that dropped down along her neck and rested lazily over her shoulder. The grin she wore was as dangerous as it was charming. She seemed young for a captain – around the same age as Raven and Maya – but that could be more telling of her capabilities than anything else.

Her second-in-command arrived shortly after having restored order in the gatehouse. He was a large, brawny man in his late-twenties with long, oily hair tied into a tight ponytail. Unlike his captain, he put much more value in discipline; a virtue that Marcus could most definitely respect. He delivered the two inattentive guards each a smack to the head and barked at them in his native tongue. He then turned to the Onyrans with a disarming smile. "My apologies for the rudeness. Things have been rather chaotic lately."

"Lieutenant Faisel," Cato said with a polite nod. "Finally a friendly face."

"No-no-no, *hieso*." Faisel held Cato firmly by the shoulders. "That is not how friends greet." He jerked Cato closer to him for a kiss on the cheek. He then pushed Cato away before reeling him back in for a kiss on the other cheek. "Ah, a little more enthusiasm the next time, Lord Cato. Perhaps one day the people of *Oni-Rah* will learn to appreciate civility."

"Hmm." Cato twisted his lips and turned to the captain who glared back at him as if he owed her something.

"You get no proper greeting from me, *toya*. You still owe me a goodbye from the last time you were here." The captain was poking her fingers into his chest as she said it. Her eyes drifted to the side when she noticed Maya reacting to her presence with a peculiar expression. "Oh? A new one, *Cozza*?" Her eyes went up, down, up, down, and up again before she let out a chuckle. "*Mala, Mala*. This one, I like."

Maya was leaning against the black stallion with her arms folded. She gave Cato a glance and lit up a smirk. "What's wrong with the *old* one?"

“Wrong?” The captain winced and shook her head. “No, no. Nothing *wrong*. Just not right for him. Cozza Cato deserves someone who—”

“Alright, alright,” Cato intervened before the conversation had the chance to grow into something he had absolutely no appetite for. “Can we move along please, *Captain*? We have things to do.”

She immediately rebuked with a backhanded slap to his arm. “Why do you say it like that, *khumar toya*? Have you bumped your head and forgotten who you’re talking to or something? Show some respect, Onyran. You’re a guest here. At least pretend to act like it for once.” She glanced at his companions and whistled through her teeth. “Have you taken their information?” she asked no one in particular.

“Only the smelly one, Captain,” the young guard replied stiffly.

The captain shifted her eyes to Marcus. There was no mistaking who was being meant. She winced in annoyance when no one provided her with the information she wanted to know. “Well?”

“Marcus Bloodthorne,” Marcus said quietly. He squinted his eyes ever so slightly when he noticed an immediate increase in the pulse of the Malakhi captain the moment he said his name. “I’m here to—”

“You’re late,” she said, cutting him off with a wave of her hand.

“Got held up.” Marcus wiggled his nose and picked up a scent he associated with excitement. He squinted his eyes even further.

The brawny lieutenant put a fist to an open palm and lowered his head. “It is an honor to meet you, Marcus Bloodthorne. I have heard many great things about you and your family. My name is Faisel Rodebok, lieutenant of Rokhan’s city guard.”

“What, no kisses for him?” Cato asked and laughed. He glanced at the captain and sent her a wink; a signal that didn’t go by Maya unnoticed.

Faisel guffawed theatrically with his head raised to the ceiling and his hands laid flat on his belly. The roaring laughter sounded like the beating of a war drum on an empty battlefield. “Next time, yes? When we are all freshened up perhaps.”

Marcus found it hard to take any offense to that. In fact, as far as he was concerned, the freshening up couldn’t start soon enough. “Perhaps.” His eyes trailed off to the captain who tried her best to keep her excitement concealed, but he could smell her pheromones and hear her thunderous heartbeat. He felt uncharacteristically intrigued by the young woman and decided to practice a look he had learned from observing Cato. “And what is your name, Captain?” A smile crept onto his face when he noticed his attempt yielded immediate results. The composition of her scent evolved from excitement to something much more complex than that.

“Zazy,” Cato answered in her stead and made a few impatient gestures with his hands. “Can we please move along already?”

“*Arrash khum boya, toya!* You’re really starting to get on my nerves here. Always in a hurry, huh? But we are not done yet.” She pointed a finger at the three who hadn’t been introduced yet. “Standard procedure. You should know that by now.”

Cato sucked his teeth and sighed. “Raven Knight,” he said, placing a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Rayne Knight,” he added, flicking a finger at the young blond who somehow managed to remain fast asleep on her gray mare amidst the ruckus. Her straw-like hair was plastered all over her face and it didn’t look like she was going to wake up anytime soon.

“Knight, huh?” Zazy gave Cato a gentle punch to the chest and grinned.

“Yup. Siblings now.”

Raven gave Zazy an awkward wave of the hand, similar to a timid kid who was forced by Dad to greet a never-seen-before auntie from some faraway place.

The captain responded with a courteous curtsy that came out surprisingly elegant, as if she had made the gesture a million times before. “Hmm. Yes. I can see the resemblance now,” she said and sent Raven a wink.

“Uhuh, because you and your sisters look so much alike,” Cato said.

Zazy grinned and rolled her eyes until they caught the green, gold, bronze, aquamarine, and everything in between of the woman with ash-brown hair that fell down to her shoulders. She inched closer until they could smell each other’s breaths. “*Mala, Mala . . .* I bet you can seduce just about any living creature with those gems of yours, *hiesan*. No wonder you have Cato drooling like a fool!”

Maya grinned back without blushing. "I think I like you very much already, Zazy. My name is Maya Bloodthorne."

"Get the fuck out!" Zazy spun around and gave her lieutenant a sturdy punch to the arm out of sheer excitement. Judging from the lack of reaction from Faisel, she must have done that countless times before already. "I knew you were special the moment I laid my eyes on you, *hiesan*." She turned to Cato with a wry smile. "Oh, Cato Knight; you sly, sly *khumar iraz toya*. Conquering one legend after another, are you?"

Cato bared his fangs. It was his only response.

"Captain Zazy," Marcus said. "As much as I would love to stay here for a while longer and exchange pleasantries, we really do have urgent business to discuss with your king."

"My king?" Zazy raised an eyebrow and glanced at Cato who was still glaring at her with a silent death threat. She laughed and turned back to Marcus. "Everything in Rokhan goes through me first, handsome. What business?"

Marcus stayed silent for a moment. Being called 'handsome' by her made his heart skip a beat, but he was forced to ignore it. He came to Rokhan for someone else. "Well, there is the matter of my betrothal to King Ifra's youngest granddaughter, Zaphyra Mantarok."

"Of course," she said and glanced at Cato again. The silent death threat had decayed to a sadistic grin.

Marcus frowned. He noticed an abnormality in her heart rate the moment he mentioned the betrothal. "We have also brought a few . . . items to show the Malakhi court." He turned around and pointed at the two wrapped-up packages.

"What's that?"

Cato scoffed and sidestepped to block her view. "Way above your paygrade, *Captain*."

She immediately responded with a rapid-fire beratement in the Malakhi tongue. The word '*toya*' and a multitude of its variations were dropped on the regular. Cato was the only one of the Onyran party who spoke Malakh fluently, but it couldn't have been especially difficult for any outsider to decipher it wasn't exactly a term of endearment. "Fine. Whatever," she finally said in the common tongue. "You have earned some privileges here, *Cozza*, but don't expect the well to remain filled if it never rains again. I will let *Pappy* know of your arrival. Faisel will show you to your quarters where you can freshen up. And if I may be so bold to suggest; please do freshen up." That last part seemed to be directed at one person in particular. "I will have the servants prepare a feast tonight and see you in the great hall."

"The captain of the city guard will be there?" Marcus asked, somewhat surprised. He had been to plenty of feasts in Ravenest before, but never saw Quinn Windeval attend any.

"*Mala, Mala* . . ." she said in a way only a mother would when she couldn't decide whether to be angry with her child, or just disappointed. She gave Marcus a few soft pats on his bearded cheek and shook her head. "No feast in Rokhan is complete without me." She let her eyes bounce up and down a few times before turning around. "Wear something nice, yeah? First impressions are important," she said and disappeared among the stream of travelers.

Marcus grunted and followed her scent until that, too, blended in with the miasma of unwashed travelers. "So people keep telling me."

Faisel was staring at Cato who only responded by shaking his head with his eyes closed.

"She is quite the character," Marcus said to no one in particular.

"She sure is," Cato said, also to no one in particular, feeling relieved to have survived that ordeal without any permanent damage.

"Mm-hmm," Maya said to a very specific person. She was dying to know what Zazy's connection was to said specific person, but her hint was either ignored or not picked up.

Faisel only grinned as that seemed to be the only logical thing to do in situations like this. He wasn't alone in that way of thinking, as he noticed that Raven had actually been grinning throughout the entire conversation like a creepy statue. "Well, my friends. It appears that you are stuck with me for the time being." He cleared his throat and pounded his chest. "Welcome to Rokhan, the finest city in all of Aedin. My name is Faisel Rodebok and I will be your guide for today."