

Chapter 5

LIFELESS AND FORSAKEN

Night had already fallen by the time they got out of the thick woods. A tinge of pink still desperately clung to the celestial ceiling, but that too was steadily diluting into an ever-expanding black. They left their mounts near a half-hidden cave a few miles back as the road had become too dangerous to continue on horseback. It didn't take long for them to regret their decision, no matter how necessary it might have been. The steep slope was a carpet of loose rocks that kept shifting underneath their feet and drained them of their strength with every step they took.

After an agonizingly long time, they finally made their way to the vantage point. The five of them lined up side by side on the edge of a towering cliff, glad to be standing still for a moment to catch their breaths and survey the city. They were shushed to a complete silence by the moaning complaints of the rushing wind and peered down on the ominous granite walls that barely reflected any light.

It only took a minute or two for them to conclude that Doriva still looked as dead and abandoned as it did before. But they also knew that looks could be deceiving and they would be foolish to judge a book solely by its cover. The last time two members of their party visited the remote settlement, it had the appearance of being lifeless and forsaken as well.

"No surprises so far," Salavor muttered as he gazed through his monocular with one eye squinted. "Doriva is your area of expertise, Lord Cato. How would you like to proceed?"

Cato raised an eyebrow and scoffed. If it were up to him, they never would have approached the city from this direction in the first place. He started tapping his fingers on the hilt of his sword and puzzled with the limited options he was presented with. The main gate was still shut, or rather, shut again after his team left for Rokhan over a month ago. Scaling the city wall was out of the question without proper equipment. The basin — his previous entry into Doriva — was at the complete opposite side of the city and would take them the better part of the night to reach. Salavor and Maya could probably find their way inside the walls through auric techniques, but they would be wise not to alert any potential seekers. Not many other options left.

He turned sideways to answer the question from the mission's captain with a shrug, but then noticed the dark silhouette of a massive pimple that bulged out of the steep mountain face. His eyes sparkled with excitement.

"I'm not sure I like that expression you're wearing," Salavor said when he noticed the peculiar shift in Cato's demeanor. "That's the face of someone who's about to get erect."

"Maybe I am," Cato said with a smirk. And perhaps he truly was, for he just remembered another way into the city; one that a Meralysian Dragon called Antonius Goldwing had used when he spied on Saraki's meeting with Jackdaw Blackshaw months ago. The prospect of going through the subterranean tunnels once more absolutely thrilled him, as if he were getting a second chance to end Saraki's life somehow. Or better yet, an opportunity to rip out *Captain Jack's* rotten heart. He pointed at a seemingly random patch of vegetation in the distance that looked like any other patches of vegetation, especially in this dim light. "There's our way in."

"What exactly are we supposed to be looking at?" Sandahl asked, hardly making an effort to peer into the direction that wasn't anywhere near the walled city.

"Saraki has a secret passage that allows him to enter and flee Doriva unnoticed in cases of emergency. Somewhere within those shrubs is a hatch to an underground tunnel that will lead us to the dungeon of Val Roka."

Sandahl frowned. "And how would you know about it?"

Cato clicked his tongue and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't see how that matters."

Salavor stretched his back and nudged his pupil with an elbow. "Anything to report?"

Nazari rubbed the fatigue from his face and went down on one knee; huffing and puffing, not at all used to the physicality that came with an actual mission. It was only a few short years ago that he spent most of

his days cooped up inside a building as an assistant librarian. But of course, the seeker wasn't brought along for any reason other than his ability to sniff out aura. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, sketching on the graveled floor with a single finger. Deep grooves etched his forehead as he focused on the surroundings that were well beyond the range of regular sight.

"No . . ." he finally said with a wrinkled forehead, unable to believe it himself. They had been chasing the trails of over a hundred auric signatures that led them to the edge of the cliff, but without any rhyme or reason, every trace of energy simply seemed to have vanished into thin air as if it had never existed at all. His throat squeezed shut when he was forced to think back on the bits and pieces of his fallen comrades that lay scattered in the woods like toppings of cherries and strawberries on a cake. "Nothing to report, Master . . ."

Salavor rubbed his chin and grunted. "I reckon it could be the work of Illio Vilavaldia."

Cato nodded in agreement. Even though neither of them had ever met Illio before, they both knew the capability of the auric technique that was called 'the Eye of the Void'. To some extent at the very least. He started tapping the hilt of his sword again. Some habits he inherited from his ingested lives had already taken up permanent residence. "Wouldn't the technique leave traces of energy?"

"Apparently not," the seeker muttered.

"Anyone in the fortress?"

"No."

"The city?"

Nazari frowned at Cato as if he just received the dumbest question in the history of mankind, but he probably knew better than to provoke the ill-tempered emissary from Onyra. "I am not able to sense much of the city itself unless we can get a bit closer."

Cato pointed at the watchtower that protruded from the silhouetted fortress like the horn of an ox. "Would you be able to sense the entirety of the city from up there?"

Nazari followed Cato's finger and then lowered his eyes to glance at the granite curtain that went on for miles. He gulped. In this light he couldn't even see where the wall ended. "Doriva is enormous, my lord."

"I guess that's a 'no' then."

"Unlike Ziyen Hizarok or Sirus Eunoia, Naz does not possess a broad vision," Salavor said, stepping in to shield his pupil from criticism. "His ability might be limited in the sense of scope — though perhaps that too may improve with enough training — but what he does see is much more comprehensive compared to the average seeker."

"Somewhat similar to Enzo Sennavelli, though obviously not as talented . . ." Cato mumbled and paused to think for a moment. "Why aren't you trained by Lord Ziyen instead? Wouldn't he be a more suitable match for you?" He shifted his eyes between the Malakhi commander and the seeker until one of them started to turn red in the face.

"Well, umm—" Nazari began, but was sharply interrupted by his master.

"Because no one in Malakhai has a better understanding of manipulating aura than I do, and Naz had to learn how to control his auric flow from scratch. He is my pupil because I chose him as such."

Cato eyed the seeker up and down a few times before turning to Salavor with a peculiar smile. "I didn't realize this was such a touchy subject."

A small light formed inside Salavor's palm and danced off his fingers to spell out two words in front of Cato's face; starting with an 'F' and ending with a 'U', all in capital letters.

"Neat little trick." Cato paused for a second to see if anything within the city walls reacted to the manipulation of aura, but then disarmingly raised his hands, the smile still plastered across his face. "Hey, no judgment from me, my man. Love is love."

"Love has fuck all to do with it." Salavor laughed and erased his auric graffiti with a lazy flick of his hand. "But surely, I don't need to tell you that having a pupil comes with certain . . . *benefits*."

"I wouldn't know. I never looked at Raven like that before." Cato tapped his lips and raised his eyes to the dark night sky. "I guess he's pretty handsome. Not sure I would like the touch of his beard on my skin too much though."

"Can we *please* get on with the matters at hand?" Sandahl grumbled through an uncomfortable cough. "It's freezing cold and we still need to decide our course. Lord Ramses and Lord Mason will arrive with

their armies in less than a week. If indeed Doriva is as empty as it appears, what are we supposed to do in the meantime?"

Cato's smile wilted back to a serious, flat line. "Our course seems pretty clear to me, Lord Dhasun. First, we enter the fortress using Saraki's secret entrance. Then, we make our way to the watchtower so that Nazari can work his magic. If Doriva truly is abandoned, I suggest we make use of the warm hospitality that Val Roka will be able to provide us and call it a night. It's been a long and difficult day for all of us and I for one wouldn't mind sleeping in a cozy, soft bed again. Also, I could really use a nice . . . hot . . . bath . . ." He shut his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath before concluding his reverie with a sigh. "Tomorrow, once the sun comes up, we will investigate the city in broad daylight."

"And what if Doriva isn't abandoned?"

"Then we will have some work to do, Lord Sandahl."

"Sounds like a solid plan to me," Salavor said and casually motioned his subordinates to get a move on.

"It's a plan," Sandahl muttered and stretched his arms with a yawn before heading to the supposed secret entrance.

Cato scoffed as he watched the Malakhs walk away and turned around to ask Maya if she was ready to join the rest of them, but she didn't seem to hear his question at all.

Maya had been staring at the darkness beyond the granite walls in a motionless silence, completely fixated on something that appeared to be emitting a bright light amidst a sea of shadows. She had hardly noticed it when she stood on the city square over a month ago, but now — looking at it from afar — the marble fountain, sculpted to the likeness of an old, veiny tree, was all that she could see. The pristine white, skeletal branches stiffly angled up to the sky in twisted zig-zags like the legs of a spider that had died on its back. Somehow, it reminded her of the dream she failed to erase from her thoughts and seemed to be calling out to her.

"*Blood of my blood . . .*" she heard the wind whisper in her ears like the final gasp of a suffocating woman. "*Become a god . . .*" The voice drew her in and she felt an immense urge to answer the call like a loyal dog obeying its master. Her body began to move on its own and just as she lifted her leg to take a step forward, she felt the strong grip of a protective hand holding her tightly by the wrist. She viciously spun around with eyes that projected the sharpness of a needle, and if looks were able to kill, the ice-cold glare would have injected her poor victim with a lethal dose of the deadliest venom.

Cato flinched at the unexpected hostility on Maya's face and was only able to gape back in shock for a moment. All color fled from his face and there was a tangible fear to be found in his eyes, but he still bravely held on to her wrist regardless of the consequences. Because if he didn't, the outcome would be infinitely more regretful. "What the hell were you thinking?" he gasped, sucking in panicky breaths through gritted teeth as if he were the one who just escaped a certain death. "You almost walked off the cliff."

Maya frowned, but gradually smoothened the creases on her forehead once she began to realize who stood in front of her. She blinked a few times, not entirely sure what just happened. All of the sudden, the only thing she could think of was death. Not the death of anyone in particular, but simply death; the end of existence.

"Are-are you feeling alright, my love?"

It remained silent for a while. The question seemed to confuse Maya and she just wasn't able to find the correct answer within the wasteland of her mind. Every single thought led her back to the irreversible nothingness of death. "Of course, my dearest. Why wouldn't I be?" she said and offered him some reassurance in the form of a smile. "I just feel very tired. It's been such a long day."

Cato winced and acknowledged her with a guttural sound. If Maya had no wish to open up, then he wouldn't prise an explanation out of her. They had spent so much time together inside her private paradise that words weren't necessary anymore to express their true feelings. On top of that, it really had been a terribly long day, and he too felt exhausted.

He pulled her closer to him, gently brushing a few strands of hair behind her ears until he cupped her cheeks with both hands. "Everything will be alright. I am here for you until the very end," he said and pressed his lips against hers.

Her reaction was hesitant at first, but she then kissed back with a fiery passion that seemed to completely overwhelm him; as if she desperately sought for a reminder what it meant to feel alive again. Her tongue entered his mouth and swirled around in a celebration of life. The flavor of him instantly made her yearn for more. He tasted so good; she could almost eat him.