

APOTHEOSIS
BOOK ONE

SHADOWS IN THE DARK

SHADOWS IN
THE DARK

BY

C.T. TANG

C.T. Tang
www.chopen.nl
chotang@gmail.com
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PART I
ONYRA

Chapter 1

SOMEONE ELSE'S DREAM

He was at the heart of the abyss, a realm where no light dared to enter. Everything was pitch-black, but the darkness went far beyond the mere absence of light. It was a darkness that had a presence of its own, a darkness that felt familiar to him, a darkness that carried a name. But he had forgotten what that name was, or maybe he had never known it at all. He wasn't able to say for sure. Everything felt hazy in this realm.

His eyes were heavy. His body felt numb. He was getting swallowed by the darkness that slowly cradled him into submission with a silent lullaby. He closed his eyes and let himself get swept away by the unseen current of the abyss.

Somehow, with his eyes shut, everything seemed to be brighter than before. Three small lights appeared in front of him, scorching through the darkness with licks of pristine, white flames. In that flickering light, he was starting to see afterimages of things that once shone brightly on its own. He thought he was reliving his memories, but inexplicably in a very vicarious way, as if they were mere stories, told to him by someone else.

He was hearing whispers and echoes; voices he knew to be foreign, but still sounded like his own. He had entered a realm where lifetimes seemed to pass in the blink of an eye, a realm where he thought to feel everything at once, and yet, nothing at all. He couldn't move. His body was but an abandoned vessel, drifting on the waves of an open sea without a captain at the helm, guided only by the force of the current. It felt right, however; as if everything was the way it was supposed to be.

The three flames were growing bigger and brighter. They kept growing until everything was engulfed in a dazzling radiance. The blinding brightness made him feel naked and exposed. It felt as if he were being watched from afar. The whispers he heard no longer bore any familiarity. All of the sudden, he had become a visitor in the domain of a stranger, a traveler in a foreign land, a mere side character in someone else's dream.

The whispers intensified. He thought he heard someone call out his name, but the whispers were hidden within a chaotic whirlwind of voices. And somewhere in the midst of that vocal storm, he even thought to hear a distant sound that reminded him of his own voice, wailing in agony.

His unease quickly rose to a panic when the whispers swirling around him escalated to angry shouts. He heard no words that he could understand, but felt that the intention was menacing, malevolent even. The voices kept getting louder until they crashed into him like a tidal wave, drowning out even the sound of his own thoughts. It lasted for what felt like an eternity, but when the ruckus finally subsided, all that remained was the harrowing sound of desiccated leaves skittering across his mind.

“Open your eyes,” he heard an unfamiliar voice say to him. The voice was cold and sharp like the whistles of a winter storm. “Open your eyes,” he heard again after a moment of silence. He didn’t trust the unknown source and felt a strong urge to resist the request. But then, a second voice came through. “Open your eyes,” it also said. Unlike the first voice, this one was warm and tender like a mild summer breeze. He finally obeyed the command and found the courage to open his eyes.

The emptiness was no more, neither black nor white. Instead, he was in a place he didn’t necessarily recognize, but somehow still made him feel as if he had returned home. He was somewhere deep within a forest, surrounded by tall birch trees that reached for the dark night sky. The trees had bark as white as the teeth of a shark and eyes that seemed to observe him like watchful sentinels of a well-guarded fortress.

The movement in his body was still absent, but he could sense himself being driven forward by an unseen force, magnetized toward a place that immediately invoked a horrible sensation of absolute terror. The eyes on the birch trees were following him as he floated past them. The friction of rustling leaves underneath his hovering feet sounded like the chants of a crowded arena, cheering him on to reach for the finish line. But he was just a passenger, riding along the stream of an unseen force. He could only follow the course that was set for him, and as he was carried outside the forest, all sounds cut off to a deafening silence.

All of the sudden, he was staring at a wide open space. High up in the nocturnal sky, the crescent moon cast down a slender beam of light, illuminating what looked like a platform of an amphitheater, and he was given a front-row seat to an exclusive stage play. Ahead of him, he saw a frozen, oval-shaped lake light up in a brilliant, silvery shimmer. A large, circular hole at the center made the lake look like an enormous eye that was staring at the heavens above. He followed the frozen gaze to the sky and felt strangely energized by the sight, as if he was given the strength to overcome any adversity in life. He felt euphoric, and for a brief moment, even thought to have become a god.

Snowflakes began dwindling down from the celestial ceiling, gracefully dancing their way toward the icy carpet in a majestic ballet. It was the most wondrous spectacle he had ever witnessed. He could almost hear the orchestra guiding the dancers to the stage. He felt that he was smiling as he watched the ethereal performance in awe, but when he returned his eyes to the frozen lake, a suffocating feeling of dread immediately latched on to his entire being.

Out of nowhere, two silhouettes had appeared at the center of the stage. They were looking down the black hole at their feet. The silhouettes had identical shapes, like two separate shadows that were cast by the very same person. They were holding hands.

He felt immensely distressed, as if seeing something he wasn't supposed to see; as if having stumbled upon an event of great secrecy. All he could think about was how he needed to escape that place as fast as he could, but his body refused to obey his command. He drifted toward the silhouettes against his will, and as he got closer to them, their appearances started to reveal themselves.

They were twins. One of the figures was a boy with long, flowing hair, as silver as the glow on the moon that illuminated the sky. His face was flawless and smooth, like a perfectly chiseled statue that was made by a master sculptor. His skin was like porcelain, as white as the snowflakes landing on it. He had blue eyes, but it wasn't any specific type of blue. It was a blue that held every imaginable shade of the color.

The other figure was a girl. She looked exactly like the boy, but felt completely different to the observing visitor. Unlike the cold and distant energy he felt from the boy, she radiated warmth and

kindness. Her presence seemed to alleviate some of his anxiety, if only for a short period of time.

His heart skipped a beat when the boy suddenly took notice of him. The frigid blues of the boy's eyes froze him to his very core and sent sharp shivers down his spine. For a moment, it felt as if he were looking at himself in a mirror, but couldn't quite recognize the reflection that was cast back at him.

The boy opened his mouth to say something, but all the visitor could hear was a chaotic rustling of leaves, scraping across the forest floor like rusty nails scratching a metal plate.

The visitor felt his panic rising. His mind was completely buried under the crushing weight of dread, as if at any given moment, the entire world would collapse. But then, the girl raised her eyes to look at him as well, and all of the sudden, his fear seemed like a thing of the past. He smiled at her — or at the very least, thought that he did — and she smiled back. Then, without any warning, she let herself fall into the black hole.

The panic instantly returned, as if he himself were sinking into the bottomless darkness underneath the frozen lake. He wanted to scream and dive into the ice hole himself to pull her back to the surface. He would have done anything just to make the anguish stop, but failed to convince his body to cooperate. He could only helplessly stare and watch the macabre scene unfold as he felt a claw squeezing his heart in an ice-cold grip.

The boy stared into the dark abyss without any discernible emotions. He then raised his head to face the intruding visitor. He smiled, just as the visitor and the girl had smiled. But the smile was hollow and harbored no warmth. It was a mere afterglow on a horizon where the sun had already set.

The visitor was terrified and had never felt so fearful for his life before. He was staring into the eyes that seemed to hold so much contempt for him, as if he were the one to blame for the girl's death.

The boy moved closer to the visitor, but the closer he came, the more he began to fall apart. Like centuries of ebb and flow that washed away all features of a rugged coastline, the boy slowly eroded to a featureless apparition until he was no more than a translucent specter. And as he hovered above the visitor, he stretched out his hand as if extending an invitation to join him.

The visitor stood paralyzed. He didn't want to accept the specter's hand, but he was no more than a puppet that could only move on the whim of his unseen puppeteer. He felt his arm raising on its own, and just when he could almost feel the touch of the specter, everything turned to black again. The frozen lake, the crescent moon, the dwindling snowflakes, the forest of birch trees, the specter; they all vanished when a shadow wrapped around him in what felt like a loving embrace.

The darkness had returned and it spoke to him: "Cato, wake up."

Chapter 2

CATO OF MOONSHIELD

Cato woke up soaking wet. He was covered in ice-cold sweat from head to toe, as if the snowflakes from his dream had melted into his waking life. Although he was no longer in the dark abyss of his dream, he still couldn't see a thing. His hair stuck to his face like a curtain that blocked all light from reaching his eyes. That was fine for the time being; he was still completely discombobulated from his abrupt transition back to reality and absently stared into nothingness until his heart calmed down a bit.

He wasn't able to stop thinking about the strange dreams that kept terrorizing his sleep for the past two weeks. It wasn't the dark abyss he called 'the Shadow Realm' that bothered him — he had been visiting that place for as long as he could remember — but rather the parts that felt like he had invaded someone else's dream.

Ever since he returned home from a diplomatic mission to Aespira, Onyra's neighboring nation to the south, he kept seeing the twins in his dreams. The first time they made their appearance, he thought nothing of it. After all, dreams were just dreams. But then they returned the following night. And the night after that. *And* the night after that as well. He skipped sleep for a few nights after that, but what he just woke up from was his seventh meeting with the twins.

The dreams were never exactly the same. The locations seemed to be picked at random. Sometimes the twins looked like adults, while at other times they were mere children. But despite the differences in setting or appearance, the dreams always followed the same plot. The twins would start off holding each other's hands. Then the boy would whisper something Cato could never properly hear. And from that point forward, everything would go from worse to an absolute nightmare. The girl would die. Always. Her death never failed to give him the feeling of being forsaken. Like a god, stripped from his divinity. Like a king, thrown off his throne. He would be left behind in an empty void with the boy who seemed to harbor a deep-rooted

hatred for him. And yet, the dreams always ended with the boy extending his hand in an invitation to join him.

Cato finally wiped his hair over his head and heaved a heavy sigh. “Who are you?” he asked out loud. It was strange to hear his own voice again. *What do you want from me?* he continued in thought, not giving himself the chance to get unnerved by the sound of his own voice.

He threw his blanket off him and stared at the dark ceiling of his bedroom for a while. His eyes were heavy, but he was determined not to fall asleep again. As much as the dreams fascinated him, they were starting to take a toll on his mind. For the past two weeks, he had been completely obsessed with the twins. They were all he could think about.

He sighed again – though this time it sounded more like a grunt – and cast his eyes to the side. Through his bedroom window, he saw a full moon clinging to a starless sky. He stared at it for a while and winced. The position of the moon told him that he was still hours removed from daylight.

His mind inadvertently drifted back to the twins. *Who are you? How am I related to you? What do you want from me? Why do I get the feeling that I am supposed to know you? What are you even trying to tell me? Are you in danger? Am I in danger?*

He was asking questions that only led him down a path paved with many more questions. No matter how hard he tried to solve the puzzle, all he accomplished in the end was getting the pieces scrambled and pushing himself farther away from seeing a clear picture. Somehow, he felt that he was supposed to know the answers already. They were on the tip of his tongue, but he kept stuttering and struggling to make it past the first syllable.

“I can’t keep doing this to myself,” he said, finally having found the courage to hear his own voice again. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and slowly let his lungs deflate. “Jump in the river. Let the current guide you.” He was using the words from his master to pacify the chaos in his mind. “In the end, we all reach our destinations.” It did seem to help, if only for a little bit and only for a little while.

“Fuck it,” he said and sat up straight. He opened his eyes again and seemed to begrudge the moon for having barely moved at all. If sleeping wasn’t an option, he might as well keep himself busy. He had

a big day ahead of him and the very least that he could do was to make himself look presentable.

Grandmaster Amon had called for a gathering of all noble members of Onyra. For the first time in nearly six years, even the eight Masters who formed the nation's ruling council would come together to discuss their plans for the future. Cato simply couldn't allow himself to appear as if he didn't belong. He worked way too hard to be where he was.

He knew that he was a valuable asset to his nation, but had always been unreasonably sensitive about his status as an Onyran lord. Unlike most nobles who were born into their ranks, he came from humble beginnings. Not many people actually cared too much about his past, but *he* did. It was a stain on his reputation he was never able to clean.

He got out of bed and groggily shuffled toward the stove to put a kettle on the fire. After a few minutes that went by without any conscious thoughts, he poured himself a hot cup of chrysanthemum tea and went back to the window by his bed.

He gazed into the black horizon and put the cup against his lips without taking a sip. He was greeted by the violent waves of the ocean, a few hundred feet below his cliffside mansion. In the distance, he saw the neighboring city of Crescent Bay, already fully awake. Dozens of fishermen and traders were loading their boats, getting ready to leave the docks as soon as they were kissed by sunlight.

He turned his eyes to the distant horizon, far away from the shores. The dark silhouette of a massive building rose above the illuminated walls of Onyra's capital city, Ravenest. The structure looked like a cat that was arching its back before taking a nap. He still remembered the first time he saw the Ashencat castle from up close.

It feels like a whole lifetime ago, he thought solemnly as his mind started wandering off to a time in his life he hadn't visited since leaving it behind. But the dream he woke up from had him feeling nostalgic, so he simply went along with the current of his thoughts.

He was an orphan, and for as far as his memories were allowed to take him, only remembered being an orphan. For the majority of his life, he had been known as Cato of Moonshield, because like all orphans, he inherited the name of the place he grew up in. *The clan of Moonshield*, he thought with a bitter taste in his mouth and stared

at the chrysanthemum tea in his hands without giving it any blame. *The largest family in all of Onyra.*

He remembered how empty and bleak his life had been. At an age far too young, he had already come to an understanding that the world he lived in wasn't going to be merciful with people like him. Children who had already suffered through the pain of growing up without the love and support of parents, were destined to continue down the path of misery once they outgrew the orphanage.

Most orphans had no history and no heritage, which meant that they had no standing in society. Therefore, it was generally expected that most orphans would have no prospect of a better future. Those who were lucky enough might find themselves serving one of the noble families where they would work in the stables, kitchens, and households, doing the dirty work that nobody else wanted to do. The ones who were blessed with the gift from Ava, or knew how to handle a blade, could either serve as soldiers or personal guards. And those who were born with an attractive appearance would be utilized in a more stress-relieving manner, with some even climbing to the status of an official concubine.

The vast majority of the orphans were not so fortunate, however. They were bound to be seduced by the calling of the streets sooner or later, and almost guaranteed to become beggars, thieves, swindlers, prostitutes, or thugs, once they left the orphanage.

Cato always feared that when he was to come of age, he would succumb to a similar fate. *How different my life would be if you never showed up, Master.* He sank deeper into his thoughts and began to lose himself to his bittersweet memories.

Chapter 3

CELERY AND SLUGS

Cato grew up in an orphanage called Knightsong Haven, which was located on the outskirts of the war-torn city of Moonshield. The orphanage gained infamy as an asylum for children who had been orphaned due to a realm-wide conflict the chroniclers later dubbed ‘the Great War’, which saw six of the seven sovereign nations of Aedin get entangled in an eight-year-long collision.

Many family trees across the realm had been uprooted by the conflict, highborn and lowborn alike. It didn’t matter whether they supported the war or opposed it; no one escaped the suffering. Ultimately, it had been estimated that the Great War reduced Aedin’s population by one-tenth. The history books would say that the western alliance of Onyra, Aespira, and Meralys had triumphed over the invading horde of Ludor, Rakonia, and Kyogun.

The orphans of Knightsong Haven, however, had never once felt they were the victors of war. Instead of being sympathized for the cruel twist of fate that saw them losing their families, the ‘Children of Moonshield’ were vilified by the masses. Everywhere they went, the orphans were met with faces of disdain. They were a constant reminder of the blood that had been shed in the past; the unignorable scars of the wound that was left behind by the Great War.

Most orphans were part of a family before they ended up in an orphanage, but Cato had known no other home than Knightsong Haven. He was discarded by his parents before his first conscious thought had even formed. Some orphans still held on tightly to their family name in a desperate attempt to preserve their former identity, but Cato had always been ‘*of Moonshield*’.

He didn’t belong there. He just knew that to be true. Somewhere buried deep inside, he had always felt that life held a bigger purpose for him. He wasn’t meant to be left rotting in an orphanage, only to be picked apart by the vultures of the streets afterward. He understood that in order to make his life actually worth living, he must leave Knightsong Haven and start anew. A life in the shadows of society simply wasn’t enough. He wanted more. He wanted to bask

in the glory of the sun, just as Ava, the Holy Goddess, had intended for all her children.

Back then, terms like ‘destiny’ and ‘fate’ were just hollow words without meaning, devised exclusively for the elite to make their own lives seem more significant. No, he didn’t believe in fate. Destinies weren’t for the likes of him. He needed something more than that to catalyze his ascension up the social ladder. Something that had been lacking since birth and separated him from any other twelve-year-old who happened to be born into nobility. He needed luck, just one gentle push into the right direction from Ava herself. Every night, he would close his eyes, hoping and praying that the Holy Goddess would finally take notice of his pleas.

And then, everything changed when a stranger showed up at the orphanage one day.

At first sight, the stranger looked like any other ordinary old man. He was clothed in a sober gray robe and walked with a wooden cane, even though he didn’t seem to need it for support. His hair was long, thin, and white; like the web of a spider, dancing in the wind as he walked. His eyes were a brilliant blue that radiated a gentle warmth, similar to sapphire stones held against the morning sun.

The stranger walked into the hall alongside Matron Teia, the matriarch of Knightsong Haven, just as the orphans were gathered for dinner. They were having a conversation, though it seemed rather one-sided. The stern matron did all of the talking while the visiting stranger simply smiled back, nodding a few times to appear engaged. They stopped right where Cato was sitting and their conversation promptly came to a halt.

Cato never even noticed their presence behind him. He was stirring his spoon in a bowl of soup and watching with mild fascination how the chopped-up pieces of celery spun around in the vortex he created.

“This is the one, my lord,” Matron Teia said and let out a deflating sigh. But whether it was a sigh out of relief or one out of reluctance, the stranger couldn’t tell. He simply chuckled and replied with a courteous nod.

“Cato, get up from your seat and give Lord Amon a proper greeting.” The matron sounded tired and even seemed to be a bit anxious, most likely because she could never predict Cato’s erratic behavior. The two occasionally clashed with each other over the most trivial things. The last few days had been especially challenging for her. Surely, she was hoping the young orphan wouldn’t embarrass her in front of the noble lord. But when Cato decided to ignore her request, she turned crimson red and bit down on her teeth. She was certain her words had reached his ears.

Cato kept stirring his soup undisturbed. He was staring at the ceramic bowl without any intention of getting even a single drop of the disgusting meal down his throat. He only knew two evils in his life, celery and slugs.

Running barefoot at night through a damp, grassy field that was covered with slugs, and feeling their slimy innards explode against the soles of his feet, had traumatized him for life when he was only eight. The sensation was so vividly ingrained into the core of his being, he could still feel the cold, viscous fluids pop against his feet whenever he thought about it. So, his hatred for slugs might have been justified, but his disdain for celery was a bit more abstract. Not even he himself could fully understand where it truly came from.

He philosophized the purpose of the vegetable, but sensed that the hall had gradually dwindled into silence. All eyes were on him when he finally raised his head. Only then did he realize the fuming matron behind his back.

“Young man, you might just have chosen the most inopportune moment to demonstrate your demon’s trait.” Her voice was sharp and cold like the edge of a blade. There was no question that Teia Knightsong was a selfless woman with a heart of gold. She founded the orphanage with the purpose of giving even the tiniest shred of hope to the utterly hopeless. But there was also no question that some orphans were simply easier to handle than others. On a good day, she would have the patience to withstand a full army of rebellious orphans. However, she clearly didn’t wake up that morning blessed with any such patience. “I will not repeat myself, Cato. Do you have any idea who this man is? Now get up and do as you’re told.”

“Oh fuuuuuck, you’re in trouble now, Cay!” Deacon, one of Cato’s friends, shouted loud enough for everyone to hear, riling up the rest of the hall.

“Uh-oh! Time to scrub the shithouse again, Cato Poo-tato!” Armin, another one of Cato’s friends, yelled from the other side of the table.

“That’s enough out of you two!” Odysa, who Cato regarded as *a bit more special* than his other friends, yelled at Armin and Deacon. She gave Cato a kick under the table and prompted him for a reaction before Matron Teia really did make him clean the outhouse again.

Cato slowly rose from his seat, straightened his back, and held his head up high. Everyone who was hoping to see one of his infamous tantrums murmured to each other with visible disappointment. He glanced at Armin and Deacon with a snarl. He turned to Odysa and sent her a wink. His eyes lowered to the silver pendant around her neck. He was proud to see the present he had given her for her fourteenth birthday over a week ago.

“Well?” Matron Teia said with her arms folded. She gave Armin and Deacon a scowl, telling them that if one more expletive flew out of their mouths, *they* would be the ones cleaning the outhouse instead.

Cato turned to the matron and smiled his most obedient smile. It was immediately answered with the rise of an eyebrow, but he couldn’t blame her for the apprehension. He knew he had been making her life more difficult than she deserved. His eyes, however, promised her that he would be on his best behavior.

He then turned to the stranger. The old man looked back at him with a peculiar smile that immediately made him feel oddly endeared. It threw him off guard for a moment, but the sight of an increasingly agitated matron from the corner of his eye made him recompose himself. If the stranger was a lord, then he would show everyone in the hall the proper way to receive a noble guest.

Without effort, he made a deep bow as if he had been trained for years to do so. “It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to Knightsong Haven, my noble lord. I hope that everything has been to your liking so far. My name is Cato and it is an honor to make your acquaintance. Perhaps my lord would like to join in on the *delicious* soup that our matriarch has cooked with all her love and dedication.”

Ignoring the unrest in the hall, the old man hunkered down with surprising agility and looked up to meet the young orphan's amber eyes. He held the stare for a moment as if he were studying a mystic relic, but the warmth from his smile never wavered. "How do you do, young Cato? My name is Amon and please believe me when I say that the pleasure is, in fact, all mine. I have traveled a long way to find you and hope to become your friend," he said and extended his hand. "Oh, and thank you for your kind offer, but I regret to say that I don't get along very well with celery."

Cato was taken aback by the visitor's friendly greeting. He had never been on the receiving end of such courtesy from any stranger before, let alone a noble lord. He blushed and flashed a grin before accepting the old man's hand.

The river of Cato's destiny finally began to flow that day. Less than a week after the old man had paid him a visit, Matron Teia told him that he had been *acquired* by the wealthy patron. She purposefully avoided using the word 'adopt', which meant that he wasn't going to be part of Lord Amon's family. The practice of purchasing orphans to use as servants wasn't uncommon among the upper echelon of society, but it did strike him as odd that he seemed to have been targeted so specifically. Regardless, he grabbed the opportunity with both hands. It didn't matter if there would be a lifetime of servitude ahead of him; at least he was shown a direction he could swim toward. Anything would be better than to remain in the stagnant waters of Knightsong Haven.

The only thing that did make him hesitate was the fact that he would be leaving his friends behind. With the cynical view he held of the world, he was sure that life wasn't going to be any kinder to them. However, he made a promise to himself that if Ava continued to smile on him, he would one day return and share his fortunes with them.

He left Knightsong Haven early in the morning, before the rest of the orphanage had awoken. It was better that way; goodbyes never did fare well with him. Only Matron Teia was there to send him off, and despite their frequent collisions, his departure was difficult for both sides. Teia Knightsong was the closest thing he had to a mother

and he was sure that he was something like a son to her as well. Her final hug seemed to be filled with emotions at the very least.

He wanted to say that he loved her, but wasn't able to force the words out of his mouth. He hated himself for it, but argued that perhaps some things were better left unsaid. So, he broke off the embrace, turned his back to Knightsong Haven, and entered the horse carriage to ride off into the great unknown.

Chapter 4

THE BELLY OF THE CAT

Cato had been morose for almost the entirety of the journey to his new home. He didn't know what loneliness truly meant until Knightsong Haven was far behind him and well out of sight. He had no idea where he was going, having never wandered beyond the bogs between Moonshield and Mengarovi before. It was only when he saw the gray arch of the Ashencat castle that he realized he had arrived in Ravenest. And the only reason he recognized the castle was because it really did look like a cat from afar, just as Matron Teia had told him before in one of her many stories.

He was smiling as he thought about all the things he would tell her when he returned home, but then it dawned on him. Again. He kept thinking that he would return to Knightsong Haven, but immediately afterward, remembered that the orphanage was no longer his home. He would probably never see Matron Teia again. The realization stomped his smile back into a flat line.

The horse carriage stopped at a stable in the courtyard of the castle. Cato stepped from the vehicle feeling alone and hopelessly out of place. Everything looked foreign to him. He didn't know what was expected of him. He didn't even know where he was supposed to go. He was scared. The first chapter of his new life was about to begin and nobody ever taught him how to read or write. And when he saw a broad-shouldered soldier with short, dark hair and a matching beard approaching the horse carriage, all his senses rose to a high alert. He felt as if he got caught entering a place he wasn't supposed to be.

The man was clad in heavy, metallic, black scale armor that made Cato weary just from looking at it. A purple cloak draped down from his left shoulder, covering a gauntlet that was lazily resting on the hilt of his slender longsword. "You must be Cato," he said, getting down on one knee. Not as a sign of courtesy, but to simply meet the boy at eye level. His face was stern, though not necessarily unfriendly.

Cato lowered his head. He kept his eyes fixed on the fingers that were tapping on the sword's ivory handle. "Yes, my lord," he answered in a fragile little voice.

The man shook his head and chuckled. "Nah. Not a lord." He removed his hand from his sword and held it stiffly in front of Cato's chest. "Quinn Windeval, captain of Ravenest's city guard."

Cato only stared back with his mouth half-opened. Compared to the city guards of Moonshield, Quinn looked like a walking fortress. He gingerly grabbed the hand and gave the captain a timid nod.

Quinn twisted his lips and stood back up. He did his best to make the young boy feel welcome, but wasn't exactly experienced with kids. He cleared his throat and put a hand on Cato's shoulder because that seemed like the right thing to do. "They told me you're from Moonshield," he said and steered the boy in the direction of the castle.

"Yes . . ." Hearing the word 'Moonshield' alone was enough to send a shock throughout his body, and once again, Cato came to the realization that he wasn't going home anytime soon. He stopped in front of the stairs that led to Ashencat's entrance.

The captain noticed the gloom on Cato's face. He had seen the same expression before on the faces of his new recruits. He might not be experienced with children, but coming from Aespira himself, understood all too well what it was like to be removed from a familiar environment and subsequently placed into a completely new one. "You must be very special to have caught the attention of the grandmaster himself," he said in an attempt to cheer up the boy.

Cato turned to Quinn, looking as white as a sheet. It was only then that he realized Lord Amon was in fact Amon Everlong; the grandmaster of Onyra, and one of the most acclaimed people in all of Aedin. In retrospect, it seemed foolish to have taken him such a long time to figure out who the old man that visited Knightsong Haven truly was. How many other white-haired lords called Amon could there really be in Onyra? He felt even more nervous than before, as if hundreds of bees were angrily buzzing through his veins. "Grandmaster Amon . . ." he said quietly.

"Aye, that's right." Quinn placed his hand on Cato's head and rubbed it into a mess with a laugh. "The old man is expecting you in 'the Belly'. We wouldn't want to keep him waiting, huh?"

“*The Belly?*” Cato raised his eyes to the massive wooden door atop the flight of stairs. Two guards were standing on both sides of the entrance and staring stoically in front of them like frozen sculptures.

Quinn chortled and nudged Cato to walk up the stairs. “Ah, forgive me. A force of habit, I guess. You see, my young friend, ‘the Belly of the Cat’ is what most of us insiders call the great hall of Ashencat.” He waved a signal with his free hand that immediately made the two guards step aside from the entrance. “Maybe one day you will call it that way as well.” He restored Cato’s hair back to a presentable fashion and gave the boy a wink. “Who knows how your river will flow, right?”

“Right,” Cato answered, pretending to understand what the captain meant.

Quinn smirked and opened the door to a crack. “So, are you ready to jump in the river?”

Cato latched onto the captain’s arm with his pulse throbbing in his temples. “No,” he said as he tried to take a peek through the narrow slit.

Quinn chuckled and pushed the door open. “Yeah, no one ever is,” he said and guided the boy into the castle.

Cato’s jaw instantly dropped to his chest. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. The great hall of Ashencat was *huge*; by far the biggest room he had ever been in. The entirety of Knightsong Haven must have been able to fit in twice, perhaps even more. He never expected a place that was called ‘the Belly of the Cat’ to be so beautiful.

The dark gray walls were decorated with stained glass windows that rose all the way to the ceiling. They were soaking up the sunlight from outside and casting a vibrant mesh of colors into the great hall. It felt as if he were passing through a rainbow as he walked toward the dais.

The entire floor was a mosaic of tiny tiles that formed some of the most intricate patterns. A three-legged spiral, consisting of only black and white tiles, took up most of the space at the center of the hall. To some, it was a symbol that stood for the past, present, and future. To others, it represented the harmonious balance between body, mind, and aura. But to Cato, it didn’t mean a single thing yet. All he knew was that it was the emblem of Onyra.

An enormous chandelier made from silver and thousands of crystals hung from the ceiling right above the spiral. Cato gawked at it in awe as the gemstones sparkled brightly in the sunlight that was projected from the windows. The chandelier must have been bigger than the entire outhouse back home. He felt sorry for the people who had to clean it.

At the end of the great hall, covering pretty much the entire back wall, was a purple banner with a black raven on it. He had seen the symbol and colors all over the city and only now deduced it to be the insignia of the Everlong clan. Underneath the banner, eight throne-like seats formed a semicircle on the dais. Three of the seats were taken.

He immediately recognized the old man who had paid him a visit at the orphanage. But back then, he had no idea he was talking to Grandmaster Amon Everlong, the supreme leader of Onyra. Having that knowledge changed everything. To be in the mere presence of such a renowned figure made him feel so insignificant, he might as well not exist at all.

The name 'Amon Everlong' was known throughout the realm, and had been known for the past fifty years. The grandmaster was renowned for many great things, but probably most famous for leading a rebellion that overthrew the monarchy many years ago when he was barely a fully-grown man. All members from the royal family were exiled from the realm, and together with the leaders from the famed Bloodthorne, Galloworth, and Seraphine clans, he reformed 'the Kingdom of Oni-Rah' to the federal republic it was known for to this day. He was called 'the White Raven' for his signature hair color, 'the Kingmaker' for his political influence that helped shape the realm, and 'the Divine Sage' for his infinite wisdom.

Cato froze completely stiff when the grandmaster greeted him with a warm smile. He tried to return the gesture, but couldn't find the willpower to smile back. He felt so small, so trivial.

Quinn made a deep bow and prodded Cato to do the same. "Grandmaster Amon, Master Sirius, Principal Aeron," he said and returned to an upright position.

"Thank you, Quinn," the grandmaster said with a gentle nod.

The captain of the city guard put a fist to his chest and nodded back. He hoisted Cato to an upright position and patted the boy on

the head a few times before he turned around and headed toward the entrance.

Cato followed the captain to the beginning of the great hall, but only with his eyes. He was told to stay and once again felt terribly alone when the door slammed shut with a bang.

“Is this the one?” the man to the right of Amon asked with a raised eyebrow. He had ash-blond hair that dropped down to one side of his neck. His eyes were blue, just like the grandmaster’s. He looked pensive and solemn, but not unkind. The man rubbed a finger over the stubbles on his chin and sucked his teeth, as if evaluating the quality of a craftwork.

“There is no mistake,” the man on the other side of the grandmaster answered. He had salt-and-pepper hair, though definitely more salt than pepper. His eyes were closed, and had been closed from the moment Cato stepped into the great hall, but he leaned forward as if to take a better look at the boy. He nodded in confirmation. “The signature of his aura definitely matches.”

“I wouldn’t dare question your sight, Master Sirius,” the man with the ash-blond hair said without sounding apologetic. “He just looks different from what I imagined.”

The man named Sirius turned to the side with his eyes still closed and smiled. “Maybe you’re just not very imaginative, Aeron.”

“Do you still remember who I am, young Cato?” The grandmaster rose from his seat and motioned the boy closer to the dais.

Cato gulped. His saliva felt like a landslide tumbling down his throat. He gingerly shuffled forward, anxiously wringing his hands. His eyes went back and forth between the three men on the dais before he answered with a careful nod.

Amon smiled. “Good,” he said. “I am very happy to see you again. Do you understand why you are here?”

Cato shook his head. He didn’t understand anything at all.

“You have caught our attention because of something that happened to you about a week before I visited Knightsong Haven. Do you know what I am talking about?”

Cato’s eyes widened in shock. It was supposed to be his most hidden secret. Cold sweat immediately started forming on his face. He was breathing heavily, but couldn’t feel the oxygen filling his lungs. “I . . .” he began, but struggled to make it past the first word.

His eyes were shaking and his vision was pulsating to the thunderous pounding of his heart. "I never meant to hurt him."

The hall turned silent as he dropped down on his knees. He did all he could to resist crying, but wasn't able to prevent the tears from flooding his cheeks. "I never meant to kill him," he said quietly and dropped his head on the mosaic tiles of the floor. He wished he could disappear from that moment and simply be erased from existence. All he yearned for was to feel the warmth of Matron Teia's hug again.

Amon stood up from his seat and knelt down in front of Cato. "I know the manifestation of one's blessing can be terrifying, especially if it's born out of anger and hatred. You have witnessed firsthand how dangerous your powers can be without proper control over it." He placed his hand on Cato's head and took a deep breath with his eyes closed. "You have a very special gift, my boy. Such gifts must be nurtured and guided with great care."

Cato slowly raised his head and meekly let the old man wipe the tears from his cheeks. He didn't understand what happened, but suddenly felt oddly at peace.

Amon smiled and helped Cato to his feet. He kept his arm around the boy's shoulder and turned his head to the dais. "Do you see that grumpy man over there? The one in blue?"

Cato nodded, but immediately lowered his eyes to the floor when said grumpy man stared back at him unamused.

"That is my son, Aeron. He is the principal of an institute called Aethelwomb. Have you ever heard of it?"

Cato didn't give the grandmaster an answer. Of course he had heard of Aethelwomb. Who hadn't?

Chapter 5

THE LORD OF NOTHING

Commonly called ‘the academy’ by its alumni, Aethelwomb was an independent institute that was located on a small island, not far off the Onyran and Meralysian coast. It was established many centuries ago for the sole purpose of grooming young and talented individuals to become future leaders of the realm. Many kings, queens, politicians, and warriors had received their teachings at Aethelwomb.

Admission to the academy was something that shouldn’t have been within the realms of possibility for someone like Cato. About a dozen or so students were admitted each cycle, so only the most gifted individuals made it through the selection. Being a graduate of Aethelwomb alone was enough to elevate one’s status to the upper echelons of society. Many hopeful nobles across Aedin applied their treasured offspring, only to be left disappointed and insulted. A rejection from Aethelwomb meant that their child – their own flesh and blood – wasn’t capable enough to be considered a leader of great significance in the future.

An orphan gaining entry to the illustrious academy was news that spread through the realm like a viral disease. A handful of orphans had been admitted to Aethelwomb before, but for an institute that had been around for centuries, the feat was still a rarity to say the least. Add that to the fact that Cato was personally endorsed by the grandmaster of Onyra, and soon enough, every person of any importance started to keep a close eye on him. Everybody wanted to know what was so special about the nameless orphan from Moonshield.

Cato spent the next five years of his life on the small island where he would be molded into a man of influence. He had always assumed that any place would be better than Knightsong Haven, but he was wrong, so very wrong. He had never felt lonelier than the first few years at

Aethelwomb. *Back home*, he had plenty of people he could talk to. At the academy, no one even made an effort to acknowledge him.

He was placed in a class with eleven other students who were all roughly around his age. At first glance, he didn't seem so different from his classmates; they were just regular boys and girls. But as time progressed, he began to understand what it was that truly set them apart. He saw it in the details, the small nuances in their mannerisms that seemed insignificant to the untrained eye. It was in the way they moved their hands when they spoke. It was in the way they chose their words with calculated precision. It was in the way they bragged about the accomplishments of their ancestors. It was in the way they raised their heads and still managed to look down on him. In short, the difference was in the blood that flowed through their veins. They were highborn, he was not. And if that wasn't already clear to him through his own observation, his classmates would gladly make sure that he understood it was very clear to them. 'The Lord of Nothing', they mockingly called him. It was a moniker he hated, but never allowed himself to show his classmates any weakness and wore the title like a crown.

He had no friends and no one to rely on except for himself. But the grandmaster had faith in him and that was enough to get him through the lonely days.

During those first few years, he isolated himself from the others and focused solely on self-improvement. Staying on the outside gave him the opportunity to examine his classmates. He observed their behavior and learned from their mistakes. He analyzed their capabilities and imitated their strengths. He was determined to become better than any of them so that no one could look down on him again.

It was easier said than done, however. The teachings were rough for someone like Cato, who never received any form of formal education before and could barely write his own name. But he never complained once. This was what he prayed to Ava for. This was the life he didn't even dare to dream of when he was still stuck at the orphanage. He couldn't allow himself to mess up the opportunity that was given to him. Through sheer will, he forced himself to understand the academy's teachings, and the more he learned, the easier it became to learn even more.

While the lectures and studies took him a lot of effort before he even began to grasp the fundamentals, he did discover he had a natural talent for handling the blade and was exceptionally gifted in the art of conversation. He would have ranked among the best of his class if not for his lack of auric control. After years of training, he was still no better at manipulating his aura than he was when he first entered the academy. And due to his inaptitude, he even ended up being hospitalized for two months after getting involved in an incident he would rather never speak of again.

But as time went by, his capabilities were finally getting noticed by one of his classmates; Marcus Bloodthorne, the golden boy of the class. The family of Marcus was so famous, he even learned about them in history class. Apparently, all male members of the Bloodthorne clan were gifted the ability to shapeshift into monstrous beasts and their physical prowess was said to be second to none.

At first, Cato didn't even feel worthy to breathe in the vicinity of Marcus. He knew that the father of Marcus was Mykon Bloodthorne, one of Onyra's eight Masters, and hailed as one of the most powerful warriors that had ever existed. He also knew that the mother of Marcus was Nia of the ancient Seraphine clan who also happened to be a Master of Onyra. She was heralded as a healer of the highest order, as proven when she even managed to get Cato back in shape after the incident. She was as beautiful as she was capable and even called a living goddess by many across the realm. He would be lying to himself if he said that he didn't worship her as well.

Cato envied Marcus. He imagined how wonderful life must be if Ava had been smiling on him from the moment he was born. He imagined what it would be like to be looked upon by a stranger and being told that the stars were shining for him. He imagined having a father and mother he could look up to. Although, truth be told, he would probably have settled for having a father and mother at all.

He didn't understand how or when it exactly happened, but Marcus Bloodthorne became the first friend he had made since leaving the orphanage. And after that, life at the academy suddenly seemed to be a whole lot easier. For the first time in years, he wasn't feeling alone anymore. Even his other classmates started warming up to him, and after a while, they were calling him "Lord Cato" as a term of endearment.

At the end of the five years at the academy, he was no longer seen as the outcast orphan anymore. He became every bit as capable as his noble classmates. He had gained eleven friends for life, but at the same time, understood that friendships could be fickle and political, especially for the nobles. For all he knew, they could stand on opposite sides of a battlefield one day. Nevertheless, he gave them all a hug – just as Matron Teia would have done – when they departed after the graduation ceremony. Regardless of the future, they would always have a special place in his heart.

He underwent a metamorphosis when he returned to Onyra and was ready to finally serve his nation in a meaningful way. Many potential paths lay ahead of him; the teachings of Aethelwomb had turned him into a deadly warrior, a crafty tactician, as well as an eloquent diplomat. Ava was smiling down on him and he had every reason to smile back. The one-way river that was his destiny debouched into a vast, open ocean with endless horizons in every direction. But he knew that it wasn't up to him to set the course. He was only the oarsman of his own ship, waiting for the captain at the helm to decide the destination.

On his eighteenth birthday, he was summoned by Grandmaster Amon to discuss the next step into his new life.

Chapter 6

KNIGHT

Cato was invited to join Grandmaster Amon at the teahouse near Ember Falls. The sun was slowly sinking below the horizon as he climbed the eight hundred and eighty-eight steps to the top, and was reminded why the three waterfalls were collectively called Ember Falls. The vapor above the cascading curtains radiated a brilliant orange in the setting sunlight, making it seem like huge tongues of flame were licking an ever-darkening sky.

When he finally entered the teahouse, he was staring at the back of the white-haired sage. The old man was sitting on folded legs and facing the violent waterfalls with his eyes closed. Cato quietly slid the door shut, knelt down at the entrance, and waited patiently until his presence was acknowledged. He knew better than to disturb his master's meditation. The roaring monotony of the crashing water was oddly hypnotic. So he, too, closed his eyes and freely let his mind wander off without any guidance.

Hours must have already passed when he opened his eyes again. The sun had gone under and the waterfalls were no more than three silvery streaks on a black canvas. His master still sat in the exact same position, but somehow, the four lanterns hanging from the upper corners of the teahouse were all lit.

“A drop of water
Joins the river as one
Unstoppable force”

After reciting his poem, Grandmaster Amon patted on the floor and invited Cato to take a seat beside him. Poetry was a pastime that helped him clear his mind and to focus on the matters at hand. He had attempted to persuade his young pupil many times before to surrender his mind to poetry, but Cato always declined and promised that he would conjure a poem once he had found the wisdom to convert his feelings into words.

“What did you dream of?” Amon asked when Cato sat down beside him.

Cato frowned and stared at his master with puzzled eyes.

Amon laughed. “We all dream, my boy. After all, we are children of Onyra; the land of dreamers. Also, you were snoring.”

Cato didn’t change his expression, but his eyes trailed off to the side. “I dreamed of darkness,” he said after a moment of silence, though he wasn’t really sure what he even meant by it.

“Oh? That sounds rather ominous.”

Cato withdrew into his mind and finished his thought with a smile. “It was quite comforting, actually.”

Amon wrapped his arm around Cato’s shoulder and gave his pupil a tight squeeze. “Well, if that’s the way your river flows, then that’s the way your river flows. There is no use trying to swim against the current.”

Cato didn’t fully grasp his master’s meaning, but nodded along all the same. “Yes, Master.”

Amon turned to the table and poured a cup of chrysanthemum tea for himself and his pupil. Cato offered to take over the pouring as a sign of courtesy, but the grandmaster politely refused the gesture with a wave of his hand.

“You have done well at the academy, my boy. Exceptionally well, I even hear.”

Cato lowered his head to hide his delight. “Thank you, Master.”

“When you first arrived at the Cat all those years ago, you were still a diamond in the rough, and look how brightly you now shine.” Amon handed one of the cups to Cato and held the other one below his nose to sniff up the fragrance.

Cato accepted the cup with a blank stare. He agreed that he had improved in leaps and bounds during his time at the academy, but didn’t feel like a gemstone of any kind at all.

“Do you still remember what I told you back then?”

“Of course, Master. Every word.”

Amon took a small sip of his tea despite it still being scorching hot. “I said that you would be under my care until you came of age.”

Cato remembered that all too well. He had dreaded turning eighteen for such a long time, and now that the moment had finally arrived, he was every bit as nervous as he thought he would be.

“What will you do now that you are a man of your own?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Don’t say sorry unless you have something to apologize for.” Amon put down his cup and took Cato by the shoulders. “It’s a simple question, my boy. You are free to do as you please. What would you like to do with your life? Who would you like to be?”

“I—” The questions might have been simple, but Cato never had the luxury to decide his own future before. “I don’t know,” he said quietly and lowered his eyes to the floor. “I always assumed I would be taken into the service of one of the noble Houses.”

Amon released his pupil with a sigh and reached for his cup again. He took a sip and immediately refilled the cup to the edge. “Is that the life you want?”

Cato couldn’t get the word ‘no’ to leave his lips. Of course he didn’t want to be a servant, but had already accepted his role in life the moment he left Knightsong Haven. He put his cup of untouched tea on the table and laid his head on the wooden floorboards. “It is impossible to repay all that you’ve done for me, Master. I am forever in your debt and will gladly serve you until the end of time if that is what it takes to show you my gratitude. My life is yours to decide.” He raised his head and showed his master a determined look. “I wish to serve House Everlong.”

Amon blew the steam from his cup, but refrained from taking a sip. He turned around to stare at the darkened waterfall. “It’s astonishing, isn’t it?” He took a moment and simply listened to the seemingly never-ending cascade with his eyes closed. “I have always found Ember Falls to be the most beautiful *and* most frightening at night. Such tremendous force.”

Cato followed his master’s gaze into the darkness but chose to remain silent. There was nothing left to say. He was at peace with the decision he made and truly meant every word he said. Grandmaster Amon, Principal Aeron; he owed everything to them. Serving the Everlong clan was the only path that made sense to him.

“No,” Amon finally said and took a sip of his tea.

Cato flinched with equal parts of shock and disappointment. He wasn’t prepared to be rejected.

“No,” Amon repeated matter-of-factly. “I will not accept you as my servant. The next chapter of your life is about to begin and I wish

to be the one reading it, not writing it. Besides, you were not born to serve, my boy. We both know that you are far too stubborn.” He shifted his eyes to Cato and smiled. “No matter what you may presume; you are not, nor will you ever be indebted to me. Never forget that.”

“Master, I—” Cato was at a loss for words. The pellucid lake that was his future turned murky all of the sudden. If not serving the Everlongs, then what? “I don’t understand.”

“You can speak to me without restraint, Cato. What do you desire? What is it that you truly want?”

Cato’s eyes sank to the floor again. For a minute, nothing could be heard except for the endless supply of water crashing down into the lake, some four hundred feet below. “My whole life I have only seen the orphanage and the academy.” He paused and chewed his lip. “I wish to see the world.”

Amon laughed, seemingly pleased with Cato’s answer. “That’s settled then.”

“Master?”

“While I don’t want you to serve me, I do wish to bind you to Onyra. Our nation is in need of someone with your talents.”

Cato placed his forehead on the wooden floorboard. “Anything, Master. What will you have me do?”

“I want you to become an extension of my voice as an emissary of Onyra, and maintain relations with the other nations of Aedin.”

Cato was overcome with joy upon hearing that. He was rooted to the floor and never even thought of getting up again. His mind was scattered all over the place. It took all his effort to hold on to his composure. “Of course, Master. I will represent Onyra to the best of my abilities. I will not disappoint you.”

“I don’t think you ever could, my boy.” Amon held his eyes on his young pupil. He was beaming with pride and even seemed to have become sentimental. He drank his tea and put the empty cup on the table.

Cato immediately reached for the pot and dutifully filled his master’s cup. Even with the adrenaline coursing through his veins, his hands were remarkably steady. It was a clear sign of his composure and swordsmanship.

Amon thanked his pupil with a courteous nod, but then adopted a serious look on his face. “Despite your talents and acumen, the noble lords and ladies of the realm would never listen to the words of some nameless orphan. How are you able to become an extension of my voice if you are a mute?”

Cato froze for a second. The teapot in his hands was shaking as he set it on the table. Even if it felt like an ice-cold dagger to his heart, he knew there was truth in his master’s words. Without any land or title, he was but a lowborn without status. Despite being an alumnus of Aethelwomb, his voice would still be unheard. A noble ear only listened to a noble tongue; he learned that much from his time at the academy. “I understand, Master.” He did his best not to sound too disappointed, but the fragility of his voice betrayed his emotions.

Amon grunted while stroking his beard with his eyes closed. “And what exactly is it that you understand?”

Cato took a deep breath in a failed attempt to rekindle his composure. “That a hammer will never be a chisel. That I can never hope to represent you in the noble courts.” Saying it out loud was the final twist of the dagger in his heart.

“Why are you always so hard on yourself, my boy?” Amon sighed and shook his head. “Your thoughts are driven by obstacles while you should think in solutions instead. Once you do that, everything becomes possible. So, tell me, what would be the solution to our little conundrum?”

Cato shrugged. He knew the answer, of course he did. But growing up in an orphanage had taught him that it was dangerous to have too much hope. Even if Knightsong Haven seemed like a long-forgotten dream, it didn’t change the fact that he was still Cato of *Moonshield*.

“Hope is a strange thing, isn’t it?” Amon said, as if having read Cato’s mind. “It is agony until it becomes reality.” He put his hands on his pupil’s shoulders and held them there until Cato finally found enough courage to meet his eyes. “I want to make you a lord of Onyra.”

Cato was stunned. He had fantasized about this moment many times before, but nothing could have prepared him for the actual reality. His thoughts were completely scrambled. “Master, I—” He lowered his head to the wooden floorboards again. “You have done so much for me already. I can’t possibly accept such generosity.”

Amon chuckled and softly patted his pupil on the head a few times. "But you have no trouble refusing my generosity."

If Cato could sink his head even lower, he would have done so in a heartbeat. Refusing a gift was considered to be a grave insult among the elite, never mind a gift of such magnitude. A drop of cold sweat slid down from his eyebrow. "My apologies, Master. I meant you no disrespect."

"Then you will accept?"

It remained silent for a while. Cato was starting to feel nauseous and fought with all his might against the overwhelming urge to vomit. Sweat poured down from his face and every particle of his body screamed at him to accept the offer. It remained silent for a while longer. His entire world seemed to tremble. "Yes," he finally managed to say. It sounded like the final whisper of a dying man. He never knew it could be so exhausting to utter a single word, but felt liberated having it finally said out loud. 'Yes', the most beautiful word to start off his next chapter with.

"Good. You will be made the lord of Serenity Hills."

Cato raised his head and frowned. "The Seraphine lands? What of Master Nia?"

Amon sighed. He grabbed Cato's cup, flung the untouched content over the railings, and proceeded to fill it with a fresh batch of tea. "Master Nia made the suggestion herself," he said and motioned his pupil to take the steaming cup. "Serenity Hills has remained unattended ever since her parents and brothers were taken by the war. She can't bring herself to visit it even after all these years. Some scars only become more visible over time."

"But why would she suggest granting Serenity Hills to *me*?" It felt surreal saying it out loud.

"She, too, has been following your progress at the academy with great interest. She knows what you're capable of and has taken a great liking to you. In the end, she only wants a suitable caretaker of her ancestral lands, and I'm sure her son has put in a good word for you as well."

"Marcus?" Cato winced. "We have a complicated relationship."

Amon laughed. "Rivalry is just a friendship in disguise. I suggest you cherish it."

Cato nodded and finally took a sip of his tea. It was bitter, but had a sweet aftertaste. "I will do my utmost best to live up to their expectations."

"I know you will." Amon stood up and stretched his back. "Your clan will need a name and banner."

"Knight," Cato answered instantly, as if having waited all his life to say it out loud. It was his tribute to the only place that had ever felt like home to him. His face reddened as he awaited his master's reaction.

"Knight," Amon repeated and stroked his beard with his eyes closed. "Simple, but strong. It is a good name."

Cato's lips twitched into a careful smile. He wondered what Matron Teia would say if she could see the person he had become. His smile promptly gained fidelity.

"Come," Amon said and extended his hand in an invitation to join him. "Rise and stand before me as my equal, Lord Cato; patriarch of the Knight clan, ruler of Serenity Hills, and son of Onyra."

Cato stared at his master's hand for a moment before he accepted the invitation. Everything felt like a dream he hoped to never wake up from.

Chapter 7

THROUGH A SEA OF SILK AND PERFUME

When Cato entered the great hall of the Ashencat castle, most of the lords and ladies had already arrived. He did intend to take an earlier attendance, but by the time he snapped out of his stroll down memory lane, the sun had already come up, all boats had already left the docks down Crescent Bay, and his remaining chrysanthemum tea had already turned to room temperature.

His nostalgic reverie wasn't the only thing to blame for his delay, however. He had the greatest trouble deciding his outfit for the largest gathering of Onyran nobility in nearly six years. It wasn't necessarily his vanity that fueled his indecision, but he would very much be lying if he said that his indecision wasn't fueled by any vanity at all.

Many nobles only saw the gathering as a way to flaunt their wealth and get noticed. They would wear the most extravagant, ridiculously expensive attire, only to inflate their status. But Cato knew that whatever he chose to wear at such occasions could be perceived as a political statement if he wasn't careful enough.

Such was the case with Lord Ferran, when he wore the cerulean blue of Onyra's abolished monarchy at a gathering over forty years ago. Had he paid more attention to the political climate at the time, he would have realized how fresh and sensitive the situation still was. Because of the color he chose, Lord Ferran was seen by some as a leftover loyalist to the old crown. He was assassinated on the way back to his mansion. Weeks later, it turned out that cerulean blue was simply the favorite color of his infant daughter.

Cato wouldn't make the same mistake that had since the unfortunate incident been called 'Ferran's Folly'. He made sure not to offend anyone with his outfit and stood at the Belly's entrance wearing a long, black robe that was made from the finest Kyoguni silk. Black was the color he chose for his clan; an homage to his time at the academy, when he was known as 'the Lord of Nothing'. A silvery-white, hollow circle was sewn onto the backside of his robe, giving the appearance it was drawn in a single stroke with a thick

brush. The insignia of the Knight clan depicted a solar eclipse; a cosmic event where the moon would shield the earth from sunlight. It was an ode to his past family of Moonshield. A violet sash was tied around his waist, signaling his loyalty to Onyra's ruling family. He looked like a proper lord if he had to say so himself; nothing *too fancy*, but definitely not underdressed.

He waded through a sea of silk and perfume, and struggled to move toward the dais where the eight Masters sat side by side at a long table. *It would seem that time has finally caught up with you, Master*, he thought when he established eye contact with the aging grandmaster. The connection seemed bittersweet at first, but shortly after, only sweetness remained. Grandmaster Amon, who was seated in the middle of the dais, sent him a greeting in the form of a warm smile. Without pause, he smiled back. *Yeah . . . it's been far too long, I know.*

For the past six years, Cato had traveled across the realm as Amon's representative and spent as much time in foreign lands as he did in Onyra. After a diplomatic mission to Spiraea — the capital city of Aespira — he returned home about two weeks ago with the intention to finally settle down for a while. However, he hadn't found the opportunity to meet with his master yet. He was too preoccupied trying to decipher the strange dreams he'd been having. Of course he could have sought counsel, but ultimately decided not to bother the old man with something he deemed to be trivial. The dreams were a puzzle he had to solve on his own. He did make an attempt to talk about his dreams with someone else, but she waved him off as if dismissing the nonsensical babblings of a child.

He turned his eyes to the far end of the table where the woman in question was seated; Aesha Celestine, the pride of Onyra. She was born in the same year as Cato, but her accolades far exceeded that of any person their age. She was only ten when she entered Aethelwomb as the youngest student in its long and fabled history. By the time Cato was admitted to the academy, Aesha had already graduated. At the age of twenty, she succeeded Lord Cesare and became the youngest person to claim the seat of a Master. Her astronomical rise to the top wasn't unwarranted, however. From birth, Aesha was destined to be a star.

Back at the academy, Cato learned that all living beings were governed by an unseen force called aura. Those who were so-called 'blessed by Ava' were capable of manipulating their aura to do extraordinary things. Most people who received the blessing had the ability to exert control over a certain element and might be able to weave a ball of fire, or a gust of wind. He also learned that women were generally endowed with a bigger blessing than men, which made them capable of manipulating stronger forces for a longer period of time.

Aesha Celestine, however, was blessed beyond any fairness or reason. Her auric well was supposedly bottomless. She was said to have the ability to conjure thunderstorms, tidal waves, hurricanes, earthquakes, and even meteor strikes. With a snap of her fingers, she could annihilate half a nation. Her auric prowess was so well-known throughout the realm, people even called her the reincarnation of Ava.

How is it possible that a woman who is barely five feet tall, can have control over so much power? Cato shuddered at the thought of seeing her angered. It was only then that he noticed her gaze and wondered how long she had already been staring at him. He saw a dangerous glint in her golden eyes that told him what a fine choice he had made with his attire. The mischievous smirk on her face further outlined her intentions. He gave her a wink to acknowledge her compliment, and to send one back in return. *You look astonishing as always, Aes.*

She wore a short, satin robe with long, wide sleeves and open shoulders. It was dyed in the color of a wilted rose, and accentuated with fine threads of gold that perfectly matched her eyes. She gently caressed her collar with a single finger and invited him to keep watching. With calculated precision, she traced the golden threads on the velvety maroon, teased a little bit with a few delicate swirls around her collarbone, and seduced his eyes to follow her finger in a mesmerizing glide down her chest. Her bronze skin revealed itself and he was even graced with the tiniest glimpse of a cleavage, when suddenly, he saw her hand turn into a fist with only her middle finger still sticking out.

He burst into laughter and scratched his nose with a middle finger of his own. *What are we doing, Aes?* he thought and allowed his mind to wander off unsupervised for a moment.

Cato had a volatile relationship with Aesha. Like him, she too grew up without the love of her parents, who were among the final casualties of the Great War. But unlike Cato, she was never brought to an orphanage. Instead, she was raised by her great-aunt, Hana Galloworth, in the heights of the Alabaster Spire monastery. When Aesha came of age, she became the rightful ruler of Crescent Bay, which until then had been governed by her uncle, Lord Cassius. But, after having ruled the seaside town for nearly two decades, Lord Cassius was reluctant to simply hand over what he had built.

Having just been granted the neighboring settlement of Serenity Hills at the time, Cato saw it as a priority to pacify the situation in his backyard before it could escalate into a family feud. In the end, he was able to appease both parties by suggesting a shared rulership, though he was sure his solution would only delay the inevitable. As soon as Aesha would bear a child, talks of inheritance and rightful ownership of Crescent Bay would undoubtedly rekindle. It might very well be the case that he would one day have to deal with the problem in a more definitive manner, but whether he would have a personal stake in it or not by then, only time could tell.

Cato and Aesha shared a similar suffering of loneliness throughout their pasts, and it was only natural that they would gravitate to each other's arms for solace. But despite their mutual affection, neither of them ever committed to anything more substantial than the occasional celebration of the flesh.

He forced himself to snap out of his reverie before anyone got to see his diabolical grin. He sent Aesha another wink and took his eyes off her. By chance they landed on the gray and dusty man called Sirius Eunoia. *All salt, no pepper nowadays, huh?* He remembered how scared he was when he first met the man who was known as 'the Eye of Onyra'. He even thought he was staring at a corpse until Sirius started talking.

The Master had his eyes closed as always. He sat next to the grandmaster with a content smile on his face, as if enjoying an orchestra no one else could hear. Even among those who were blessed by Ava, Sirius Eunoia was graced with an extraordinary gift that only one in a few thousand possessed. He was a seeker; someone with the ability to sense the flow of aura. But he wasn't just any ordinary seeker, he was the very best. His eyes were shut because he

didn't need them to see. He perceived the world through the movement of aura, and with it, saw much more than his eyes could ever show him. It had been said that Master Sirius was able to sense *and identify* hundreds of people within a few mile radius. He could see through buildings, forests, and mountains, as if they were all made of glass. His rare gift was the reason he could always be found in the vicinity of Grandmaster Amon. Any attempts at an assassination would be snuffed out by the seeker in advance.

Sirius frowned when he sensed that Cato was staring at him. He then smirked and slowly opened his eyes to pierce the young lord with an icy gaze.

Cato immediately froze for a second. It was easy to forget that Sirius wasn't actually blind. He snickered and turned away from the seeker. He froze again when his eyes were locked with the ruby-colored eyes of the man that was known as 'the Beast of Onyra', 'the Monster of Mengarovi', or simply Mykon Bloodthorne. But, more than any names or titles, Cato knew Onyra's most reputable warrior best as the father of Marcus.

The similarities are uncanny, he thought as he shifted his eyes in search of his friend. Marcus was nearly identical to his father in every sense of the word. They both were commanders in the army of Onyra. They both valued loyalty, honor, and justice, almost to a fault. They both possessed the ability to shapeshift into animalistic monsters at will. The only difference was that Mykon looked a bit older, wore a goatee instead of a neatly-trimmed beard, and had longer, slightly darker hair. Other than that, Cato might as well be staring at Marcus. *Without question, the Bloodthorne blood is thick.*

He looked around to find his friend, but no matter where he looked, Marcus was nowhere to be seen. *It's very unlike you to be late, dumbass. Please don't tell me you got lost again . . .*

Marcus became the commander of the Fourth Division in the army of Onyra shortly after graduating from Aethelwomb. He was responsible for the safety of the nation's southeastern borders, and being as dutiful as he was, rarely left his post in Mengarovi. As a result, he could never find his way around Ravenest, or any other city for that matter.

Cato thought about the last time he visited Mengarovi and felt a cold shiver crawl up his spine. He had once heard — in a tavern, not

in the history classes of Aethelwomb — that Mordecai, the founder of the Bloodthorne clan, came to Aedin from a mystic realm in the north where shapeshifting was considered to be no more than a mundane ability. *Ridiculous.*

But what he did learn at the academy was that Mordecai eventually settled down in Gallow Woods and served the royal family of Oni-Rah as a mercenary. After years of service, the king made him the lord of Gallow Woods, and Mordecai changed the name of his new domain to 'Mengarovi'. Supposedly, it meant 'heart of the Wolf God' in his native tongue. And now, centuries later, Mengarovi was known as a forest where the hairy demons of the Bloodthorne clan roamed free.

Cato sucked his teeth and took a glass of wine from one of the servants who passed by. As much as he had traveled over the years, he had yet to come across a place where shapeshifting was even remotely considered *mundane*. He couldn't fathom a world where turning into monstrous killing machines would do no more than trigger a few shrugs. He knew that taller tales had been told before, especially in taverns, but that particular story always stuck with him. He would love to see a world that was filled with the wondrous unknown, but until he saw it with his own eyes, considered it to be nothing but a drunken man's tale.

And speaking of unreliable drunks. His eyes drifted toward a man who was bugging a servant for yet another refill. *Cronus Metalung.* Even in thought, he spat out the name. He sharply scowled at the Master who had a messy set of hair — *in the color of human feces* — and was on the verge of embarrassing himself with the way he yelled at the poor boy.

Cronus Metalung, the latest addition to the 'Council of Masters' and the lord of Grimshire. He was one of the most celebrated heroes of the Great War and the last orphan before Cato to have been admitted to Aethelwomb. But unlike Cato, he never graduated. Cronus left the academy when he was only sixteen to help fight in the war. He was touted as a talented earth-weaver; someone with the ability to manipulate minerals through aura. He was also known to be highly ambitious, and coupled with his unquenchable thirst for glory, quickly made a name for himself during the final stretch of the war. His status was elevated to one of a hero when he successfully

defended his home village of Grimshire from invading Rakonian troops.

Only a few years after the war, the orphan called 'Cronus of Grimshire' was elevated to 'Cronus Metalung', the lord of Grimshire. Although never having graduated from Aethelwomb, he was invited to become a teacher there and held that position until he left the academy to become a commander in the army of Onyra. His Third Division was responsible for the nation's northwestern border, which meant that Cato would fall under his command in the event of war. When Cronus was thirty-four — just a few months before Cato graduated — he succeeded Lady Felice as one of Onyra's eight Masters.

Cato smirked as he stared at the intoxicated Master who was having his fourth and fifth drink almost at the same time. It would appear that Cronus still had an unquenchable thirst, but the taste he was craving had certainly changed over the years. Cato almost felt sorry for the hero he had once looked up to. Almost. *If only you weren't such a malignant tumor, Cronus Metalung.* Again, he pronounced the name in his thoughts with venom.

The man who sat next to Cronus seemed to have taken notice of Cato's nasty glare. He was sipping a glass of water with a hint of amusement on his face. Cato glanced back and gave the spymaster a polite nod before he turned his eyes elsewhere. He would not want to be trapped in a staredown with Kaius Silverink of all people.

The pale-skinned, raven-haired Master was the leader of Onyra's 'shadow affairs' division; a unit, separate from the regular army that specialized in covert operations and interrogations. Kaius was a weaver of illusions with the ability to influence minds and known to have used morally dubious tactics in order to extract the information he needed.

Cato turned his attention to the final two Masters at the table. He saw Nia Seraphine talking to her mentor, Hana Galloworth, and somehow, received a strong feeling that they were talking about him. He was too distracted to lipread their conversation, however. The eyes of Kaius Silverink were still tightly fixed on him and demanded to be seen. Whether the decision to do so was voluntary or not, he turned his eyes to the spymaster all the same. *I'm not playing this*

game with you again, Master Kaius. Not today, he thought and shook off his unease.

Master Hana seemed to notice the disturbance in his mind and sent him a wry smile. He stared back into her opaque, gray eyes that were halfway hidden behind a curtain of wrinkles and wasn't sure if he was supposed to smile back. He wasn't very familiar with her. Aesha had told him a bit about her great-aunt before, but nothing he didn't already know.

Hana Galloworth was the only Master at the table who stood alongside Amon Everlong when he overthrew the monarchy. She was the spiritual leader of the monastery in Alabaster Spire and lived a secluded life, high up in the permanently frozen mountains. She only left the temples on the rarest of occasions. Her presence at the gathering signified the importance of the event and it was only the second time that Cato had seen her.

He felt uneasy for a moment when he thought about the implications of her attendance, but as soon as he received a warm smile from Master Nia, all worries seemed to melt away.

My goddess . . . His thoughts didn't go much further than that. Nia Seraphine was the first, and quite possibly, only woman he ever truly worshiped. When they first met, he was only fourteen and already halfway past the gates of death. His world had been turned to black when she brought back the light. He couldn't remember much from the two months he spent under her care, only that she had saved his life, and that he had worshiped her like a goddess ever since. When he received the ownership of Serenity Hills, he even had a shrine built in honor of the fallen Seraphine clan.

The Belly of the Cat suddenly turned silent when Mykon Bloodthorne rose from his seat. He took a moment to let the silence sink in before he spoke to the audience. His ruby-colored eyes scanned across the hall to make sure he had grabbed the attention of every single attendant. "Welcome, noble lords and ladies of Onyra," he finally said after the silence was starting to make some people more than just a little nervous. "Please take your seats and try to be on your best behavior. Grandmaster Amon has a few words he would like to say."

Everyone shuffled to their seats while finishing their conversations in a hurry. Cato looked around one last time to find his friend, but Marcus was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 8

RUMBLINGS IN THE BELLY

Grandmaster Amon stood up from his seat with a glass of wine in his hand. He wore a long, white coat with thick, black outlines over a purple robe with wide sleeves. A golden brooch of a raven was pinned to his chest. He looked at his audience with a calm demeanor. A lukewarm smile brushed his face as if nothing in the world could possibly disturb his harmony.

Cato observed the old man through squinted eyes. *You hide your discomfort well, Master.* The face of Grandmaster Amon might have told the attendants a straightforward story, but having been a diplomat for years who visited all imaginable courts across the realm, Cato had learned how to read between the lines. He saw the true story on his master's face, and even though he couldn't exactly define the unease, still sensed that something was bothering the old man.

"My friends," Amon said and gave his beard a single long stroke. "Let me begin by welcoming you all to this gathering. It has been such a long time since this great hall has been graced by the voices of so many lords and ladies. It has been even longer since all eight Masters of Onyra have shared a table together. I would like to take this moment to show you my heartfelt appreciation." He raised his glass to all those in attendance and lowered his head as a sign of respect. "To good health, good friends, and good fortune. To the nation of dreamers. To Onyra."

The guests mimicked the grandmaster's gesture. "To Onyra!" they all chanted in unison and took a sip from their drinks. Everybody immediately loosened up after that and started chattering with each other again. Master Mykon seemed none too pleased about the discord, but Grandmaster Amon allowed it to go on for a while as it gave him the opportunity to trade in his glass of wine for a cup of tea.

Cato scoffed when he saw that Cronus wasn't in a sipping mood at all. The commander of the Third Division greedily held the glass upside down against his lips and started barking at the servant for a refill. *Seriously, Cronus Metalung. Get a grip on yourself, man.* He was about to take a sip himself when he saw the pitch-black eyes of

Master Kaius piercing through him. It unnerved him enough to halt his motion. *What, Kaius? Is there something you want from me?* He proceeded to take his sip, but almost choked on his drink when the spymaster seemed to answer his thoughts with a shrug.

Amon held up his palm. The Belly stopped rumbling in an instant. “It truly warms my soul to see us here together, united under one roof, our hearts beating to the very same rhythm.” He paused for a moment to let his message sink in. He made sure to establish eye contact with each and every one of the attendants.

Some lords and ladies nodded back in agreement. Others raised their drinks, showing their respect to the grandmaster. “Hear! Hear!” one of the older lords shouted from the back.

“I regret to say that this gathering is not solely meant to be a social event, however. Important matters must be discussed. Crucial decisions need to be made.

“Time is a river that flows without pause and we have to adapt to its course if we want to keep our heads afloat. For the past twenty-three years, we have been blessed with a prolonged era of peace and prosperity. We should be proud of that. Even right now, I am overjoyed to see faces among us that have never seen the agony of war in their lifetime.

“But nothing lasts forever, my friends. Make no mistake; twenty-three years is a long time. Long enough for relationships to change and evolve. It would be unwise to sit idly by and simply assume that peace doesn’t take any effort. As nations, we need to stay in touch with each other. We can’t always know what other nations are planning, but thanks to our emissaries who are sent across the realm, we are doing our best to maintain a healthy understanding with them.

“As we all know, the seven sovereign nations of Aedin have cooperated tirelessly for the past decades to overcome the wounds of the Great War together. During that time, we have learned to forgive, and we have learned to trust. It should go without saying that trust is the foundation of any relationship.”

Amon paused to take a sip from his cup. Cato took this opportunity to look around and saw that many in attendance were whispering to one another, concealing their lips behind hands and fans. He also saw that the seat reserved for the commander of the Fourth Division was still empty.

“But,” the grandmaster continued before the whispers were given a chance to grow, “there are settlements out there not committed to the idea of a united realm. They would rather live by their own rules and have no desire in maintaining complex, diplomatic relationships with the sovereign nations. As such, we have no means to exert influence on their politics.

“The world keeps growing, and the larger it becomes, the murkier it gets. That is precisely why it’s so important to keep engaging in diplomacy. More eyes will be needed, but there are only so many emissaries we can send off into the realm. If we wish to extend this era of peace, existing friendships need to be rekindled. New alliances have to be forged.

“Considering our history with Ludor, Rakonia, and Kyogun, it is understandable that they need more time to accept our friendship. How long it takes for enemies to grow into friends, I cannot say. What I can assure you, however, is that efforts are being made.

“Malakhai, for example, has finally decided to accept our offer of a long-lasting alliance through the means of marriage. Yes, my friends, the seed that we planted years ago has finally begun to germinate. As of yesterday morning, Marcus Bloodthorne has resigned from his position as commander of the Fourth Division. He should be on his way to Rokhan right now to discuss the terms of his betrothal.”

Cato was stunned. The announcement took him completely by surprise. And judging from the rumblings in the Belly, he wasn’t the only one caught off guard. His eyes turned to the empty seat next to the dais. He begrudged his friend for never even telling him about the betrothal, though admitted that he hadn’t seen Marcus in months. *I can’t believe you’re getting married.* His thoughts made him feel a little bit lonely for the first time in years, but only for a short while. *Poor girl.*

Amon raised his hand to pacify the Cat. “If all goes well, Marcus will join Malakhai as a member of their royal family. Naturally, more specifics about the union will be announced in due time, but for now it seems that Malakhai and Onyra are finally ready to jump in the river together after years of carefully dabbling our toes.”