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OUR CONTINENT AND TIME.”

—KEN LIU

BLACK SUN



A NOVEL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

REBECCA

ROANHORSE



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BLACK SUN

BETWEEN EARTH AND SKY
BOOK ONE



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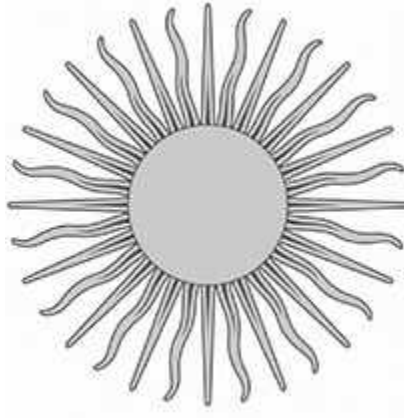
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For that kid in Texas who always dreamed in epic



THE PEOPLE OF THE MERIDIAN

• THE OBREGI MOUNTAINS •

Serapio – *The Crow God Reborn*

Saaya – *Serapio's mother*

Marcál – *Serapio's father*

Paadeh – *Serapio's first tutor*

Eedi – *Serapio's second tutor, a Spearmaiden*

Powageh – *Serapio's third tutor, a Knife*

• CITY OF CUECOLA •

Xiala – *The Captain, sailor, Teek in origin*

Callo – *First mate, sailor*

Patu – *Cook, sailor*

Loob – *A sailor*

Baat – *A sailor*

Poloc – *A sailor*

Atan – *A sailor*

Balam – *A merchant lord*

Pech – *A merchant lord*

• CITY OF TOVA •

THE WATCHERS

Naranpa – *Sun Priest, Order of Oracles (hawaa)*

Iktan – *Priest of Knives, Order of Knives (tsiyo)*

Abah – *Priest of Succor, Order of the Healing Society (seegi)*

Haisan – *Priest of Records, Order of Historical Society (ta dissa)*

Kiutue – *Former Sun Priest (deceased)*

Eche – *Dedicant, Order of Oracles*

Kwaya – *Dedicant, Order of the Healing Society*

Deeya – *A servant*

Leaya – *A servant*

THE SKY MADE CLANS

Yatliza – *Matron, Carrion Crow*

Okoa – *Yatliza's son, Carrion Crow*

Esa – *Yatliza's daughter, Carrion Crow*

Chaiya – *Captain of the Shield, Carrion Crow*

Maaka – *Leader of the Odohaa, Carrion Crow*

Ashk – *A stablehand, Carrion Crow*

Feyoue – *A healer, Carrion Crow*

Kutssah – *A giant crow*

Benundah – *A giant crow*

Paida – *A giant crow*

Ieyoue – *Matron, Water Strider*

Aishe – *Water Strider*

Zash – *Water Strider*

Tyode – *Water Strider*

Paipai – *A giant water strider*

Nuuma – *Matron, Golden Eagle*

Peyanna – *Matron, Winged Serpent*

THE DRY EARTH (CLANLESS)

Denaochi – *Brother to Naranpa*

Akel – *Brother to Naranpa*

Jeyma – *Father to Naranpa*

Zataya – *A witch*

You are the substitute, the surrogate of Tloque Nahuaque, the
lord of the near and far.
You are the seat [the throne from which he rules], you are his
flute [the mouth from which he speaks],
he speaks within you,
he makes you his lips, his jaws, his ears...
He also makes you his fangs, his claws,
for you are his wild beast, you are his eater of people, you are
his judge.

—*The Florentine Codex*, Book VI, 42R



CHAPTER 1

THE OBREGI MOUNTAINS

YEAR 315 OF THE SUN

(10 YEARS BEFORE CONVERGENCE)

O Sun! You cast cruel shadow
Black char for flesh, the tint of feathers
Have you forsaken mercy?

—From *Collected Lamentations from the Night of Knives*

Today he would become a god. His mother had told him so.

“Drink this,” she said, handing him a cup. The cup was long and thin and filled with a pale creamy liquid. When he sniffed it, he smelled the orange flowers that grew in looping tendrils outside his window, the ones with the honey centers. But he also smelled the earthy sweetness of the bell-shaped flowers she cultivated in her courtyard garden, the one he was never allowed to play in. And he knew there were things he could not smell in the drink, secret things, things that came from the bag his mother wore around her neck, that whitened the tips of her fingers and his own tongue.

“Drink it now, Serapio,” she said, resting a hand briefly against his cheek. “It’s better to drink it cold. And I’ve put more sweet in it this time, so you can keep it down better.”

He flushed, embarrassed by her mention of his earlier vomiting. She had warned him to drink the morning’s dose quickly, but he had been hesitant and sipped it instead, and he had heaved up some of the drink in a milky mess. He was determined to prove himself worthy this time, more than just a timid boy.

He grasped the cup between shaking hands, and under his mother's watchful gaze, he brought it to his lips. The drink was bitter cold, and as she had promised, much sweeter than the morning's portion.

"All of it," she chided as his throat protested and he started to lower the cup. "Else it won't be enough to numb the pain."

He forced himself to swallow, tilting his head back to drain the vessel. His stomach protested, but he held it down. Ten seconds passed, and then another ten. He triumphantly handed the empty cup back.

"My brave little godlet," she said, her lips curling into a smile that made him feel blessed.

She set the cup on the nearby table next to the pile of cotton cords she would use later to tie him down. He glanced at the cords, and the bone needle and gut thread next to them. She would use that on him, too.

Sweat dampened his hairline, slicking his dark curls to his head despite the chill that beset the room. He was brave, as brave as any twelve-year-old could be, but looking at the needle made him wish for the numbing poison to do its job as quickly as possible.

His mother caught his worry and patted his shoulder reassuringly. "You make your ancestors proud, my son. Now... smile for me."

He did, baring his teeth. She picked up a small clay bowl and dipped a finger in. It came out red. She motioned him closer. He leaned in so she could rub the dye across his teeth. It tasted like nothing, but part of his mind could not stop thinking about the insects he had watched his mother grind into the nut milk to make the dye. A single drop, like blood, fell on her lap. She frowned and scrubbed at it with the meat of her palm.

She was wearing a simple black sheath that bared her strong brown arms, the hem long enough to brush the stone floor at their feet. Her waist-length black hair spilled loose down her back. Around her neck, a collar of crow feathers the shade of midnight, tips dyed as red as the paint on his teeth.

"Your father thought he could forbid me to wear this," she said calmly enough, but the boy could hear the thread of pain in her voice, the places where deprivation and sorrow had left their cracks. "But your father doesn't understand that this is the way of my ancestors, and their ancestors before them. He cannot stop a Carrion Crow woman from dressing to honor the crow god, particularly on a day as sacred as today."

“He’s afraid of it,” the boy said, the words coming without thought. It must be the poison loosening his tongue. He would never have dared such words otherwise.

His mother blinked, obviously surprised by his insight, and then she shrugged.

“Perhaps,” she agreed. “The Obregi fear many things they do not understand. Now, hold still until I’m done.”

She worked quickly, coloring his teeth a deep carmine until it looked like blood filled his mouth. She smiled. Her teeth were the same. Father was right to fear her like this, the boy thought. She looked fierce, powerful. The handmaiden of a god.

“How does your back feel?” she asked as she returned the bowl of dye to the table.

“Fine,” he lied. She had carved the haahan on his back earlier that day at dawn. Woken him from bed, fed him his first cup of numbing poison, and told him it was time. He had rolled dutifully onto his stomach, and she had begun.

She’d used a special kind of blade he had never seen, thin and delicate and very sharp. She talked to him as she worked, telling him that if he had been with his clan, a beloved uncle or cousin would have carved his haahan over a series of months or even years, but there was no time left and it had to be her, today. Then she had told him tales of the great crow god as she cut curving lines—the suggestion of crow wings—across his shoulders and down his lateral muscles. It had burned like sticking his hand in the fire, perhaps because he hadn’t drunk the full measure of the drink. But he had endured the pain with only a whimper. Next, she made him sit up and she had cut a crow skull at the base of his throat, beak extending down his chest, so it sat like a pendant in his skin. The pain was tenfold worse than the wings had been, and the only thing that had kept him from screaming was the fear that she might accidentally slice his throat if he moved too suddenly. He knew his mother’s people carved their flesh as a symbol of their perpetual mourning for what was lost, and he was proud to bear the haahan, but tears still flowed down his cheeks.

When she was done, she had taken in her handiwork with a critical eye. “Now they will recognize you when you go home, even if you do look too much Obregi.”

Her words stung, especially that she would say them even as she marked him. Not that he wasn't used to the observation, the teasing from other children that he looked not enough this or too much that.

"Is Obregi bad?" he dared to ask, the poison still making him overbold. Obregi was certainly the only home he had ever known. He had always understood that his mother was the foreigner here; she came from a city called Tova that was far away and belonged to a people there who called themselves Carrion Crow. But his father was Obregi and a lord. This was his ancestral home they lived in, his family's land the workers tilled. The boy had even been given an Obregi name. He had also inherited the curling hair and slightly paler face of his father's people, although his narrow eyes, wide mouth, and broad cheeks were his mother's.

"No, son," she chided, "this life, this place"—she gestured around them, taking in the cool stone walls and the rich weavings that hung from them, the view of the snowy mountains outside, the entire nation of the Obregi—"was all to keep you safe until you could return to Tova."

Safe from what? He wanted to ask, but instead he said, "When will that be?"

She sighed and pressed her hands against her thighs. "I am no Watcher in the celestial tower," she said, shaking her head, "but I think it will not be so long now."

"A month? A year?" he prodded. *Not so long now* could mean anything.

"We are not forgotten," she assured him, her face softening. She brushed back an unruly lock that had fallen across his forehead. Her dark eyes brimmed with a love that warmed him from head to toe. She may look frightening to his father like this, but to him she was beautiful.

Shadows moved across the floor, and she looked over her shoulder as the afternoon light turned strange.

"It's time." She stood, her face flushed with excitement, and held out a hand. "Are you ready?"

He was too old to hold her hand like a baby, but he was scared enough of what came next that he pressed his palm against hers and wrapped his fingers around tight, seeking comfort. She led him outside onto the stone terrace where the late-season winds chilled his bare skin.

The view was a feast for the eye. From here they could see the valley, still clinging to the golds and crimsons of late fall. Beyond them squatted the high

jagged mountains where the ice never melted. He had spent many afternoons here, watching hawks circle the village that sat just on the edge of the valley, dropping pebbles off the ledge to watch them shatter to dust on the rocky cliffs below. It was a place of fond memories, of good thoughts.

“So cloudy,” his mother fretted, her hand still wrapped around his, “but look, it changes even as we prepare.” She beamed, showing her bloody teeth.

She was right. He watched as the sky cleared to reveal a tattered sun, hunched like a dull watery ball atop the mountains. And to its side, a darkness loomed.

The boy’s eyes widened in alarm. Mama had told him the crow god would come today, but he had not fathomed the horror of its visage.

“Look at the sun, Serapio,” she said, sounding breathless. “I need you to look at the sun.”

He did as he was told and watched with a growing terror as it began to disappear.

“Mama?” he asked, alarmed, hating that his voice sounded high and frightened.

“Don’t look away!” she warned.

He would not. He had endured her knife and her poison, and he would endure the needle soon, too. He could master the sun.

But his eyes began to water and sting.

“Steady,” she murmured, squeezing his hand.

His eyes ached, but his mother tugged the delicate skin of his eyelids with her fingernails to keep them open. He cried out as she grazed his eyeball, and instinct more than desire made him buck. She pulled him tight, arms like a vise and fingers gripping his jaw.

“You must look!” she cried. And he did, as the crow god ate the sun.

When all that was left was a ring of trembling orange fire around a hole of darkness, his mother released him.

He rubbed at his stinging eyes, but she slapped his hands away. “You’ve been so brave,” she said. “You must not fear now.”

The edge of a bubbling panic crawled up his spine at what was to come next. His mother did not seem to notice.

“Hurry now,” she said, ushering him back inside, “while the crow god holds sway over the world.”

She pressed him to sitting in the high-backed chair. His limbs had grown heavy and his head light, no doubt from the poisoned cup. The panic that had tried to rise died on a soft, terrified half-moan.

She bound his feet to the legs of the chair and wrapped the cords around his body until he could not move. The rope stung where the haahan were still raw.

“Keep your eyes closed,” she warned.

He did, and after a moment, he felt something wet press along the line of his eyelashes. It was cold and deadened the skin. His lids felt so weighted that he did not think he could open them again.

“Listen to me,” his mother said. “Human eyes lie. You must learn to see the world with more than this faulty organ.”

“But how?”

“You will learn, and this will help.” He felt her slip something into his pocket. It was a bag like the one she wore around her neck. He could just reach it if he wiggled his fingers, feeling the fine powder inside. “Hide this, and use it only when you need it.”

“How will I know when I need it?” he asked, worried. He didn’t want to fail her.

“You will learn, Serapio,” she said, voice gentle but firm. “And once you have, you must go home to Tova. There you will open your eyes again and become a god. Do you understand?”

He didn’t understand, not really, but he said yes anyway.

“Will you come with me?” he asked.

Her breath hitched, and the sound scared him more than anything else she had done that day.

“Mama?”

“Hush, Serapio. You ask too many questions. Silence will be your greatest ally now.”

The needle pierced his eyelid, but he was only distantly aware of it. He could feel the stitches sealing his eyes shut, the pull and lift of the thread through his skin. The panic that had failed to rise earlier swelled up larger now, made him twitch in his chair, made the wounds on his back pull and sting, but the cords held him tight and the drugs kept his muscles lax.

A sudden pounding at the door made them both jump.

“Open the door!” a voice yelled, loud enough to shake the walls. “If you’ve touched that boy, I’ll have your head, I swear it!”

It was his father. The boy thought to cry out to him, to let him know that he was okay. That the crow god’s will must be followed, that he wanted this, that his mother would never hurt him.

She returned to her work, ignoring his father and his threats. “Almost done now.”

“Saaya, please!” pleaded his father, voice breaking.

“Is he crying?” the boy asked, concerned.

“Shhh.” The corner of his left eye tugged tight as she tied off the last knot.

Her lips pressed briefly to his forehead, and she ran a gentle hand through his hair.

“A child in a foreign place to a foreign man,” she murmured, and Serapio knew she was talking to herself. “I’ve done everything required. Even this.”

Even this was what he had suffered today, he knew it. And for the first time, a tendril of doubt crept through his belly.

“Who, Mama? Who asked you to do this?” There was still so much he didn’t understand, that she hadn’t told him.

She cleared her throat, and he felt the air shift as she stood. “I must go now, Serapio. You must carry on, but it is time for me to join the ancestors.”

“Don’t leave me!”

She bent her head and whispered in his ear. A secret name. His true name. He trembled.

And then she was moving away, her footfalls heading swiftly toward the open terrace. Running. Running to where? There was only the terrace that ended in the open sky.

And he knew she was running so she could fly.

“Mama!” he screamed. “No!”

He struggled to open his eyes, but the stitches held, and his lids did not budge. He thought to claw at his face, but the cords held him tight and the drink made time feel strange.

“Son!” his father screamed. Something huge hit the door, and the wood splintered. The door was coming down.

“Mama!” Serapio cried. “Come back!”

But his begging did no good. His mother was gone.



CHAPTER 2

CITY OF CUECOLA

YEAR 325 OF THE SUN

(20 DAYS BEFORE CONVERGENCE)

A Teek out of water swims in wine.

—Teek saying

The early-dawn fruit sellers walked the streets of Cuecola, enticements to purchase the day's brews ringing from their lips. Their voices flowed through the narrow streets and wide avenues alike, past the modest oval-shaped, thatch-roofed homes of the common citizens and up through the more lavish multistoried stone mansions of the merchant lords. They wove around the jaguar-headed stelaes that guarded the great four-sided pyramids and across the well-worn royal ball court that sat empty in the predawn darkness. Across tombs and market squares and places of ceremony and out past the city walls, they filled the morning with their cries. Until even Xiala, blissfully unconscious until moments before, heard them.

"Somebody please shut them up," she muttered, cheek flat against the cold dirt floor on which she had slept. "They're giving me a headache." She waited, and when no one acknowledged her, she asked again, a little louder.

For answer, someone kicked her in the ribs. Not hard, but enough to make her grunt and crack an eye open to see who had done it.

"You shut up," the culprit said. It was a skinny woman twice her age with a drag to the left side of her face and an ominous scar across her neck. "You're making more noise than them."

“—mmm not,” Xiala mumbled, giving the stranger her best glare. Dirt stuck to her lip. She dragged a hand across her mouth to wipe it away. Only then did she get a good look around at the room she was in: dark wet walls and a wooden-slatted door where an open entrance should have been. Too many women reeking of body odor and fermented cactus beer sprawled on the floor, a lucky few huddled under threadbare cotton blankets in the cold. Someone was softly weeping in a dark corner.

“Fuck,” she said, sighing. “I’m in jail again.”

The skinny woman, the one who had kicked her, cackled. She was missing teeth. The two front and another lower one. Xiala wondered if they’d rotted out or she had sold them. She looked like someone who might have sold them.

“This ain’t a merchant lord’s house,” the woman said, grinning. “That’s for sure.”

“Thank the lesser gods for that, at least,” she said, and meant it. She was no fan of merchant lords. In fact, it was working for a merchant lord that had landed her here, in an admittedly roundabout way. If Lord Pech hadn’t tried to double-cross her, she wouldn’t have had to throw him into the ocean. She hadn’t stuck around to see if he was rescued or not, choosing instead to retreat to a cliffside cantina that looked much too seedy for someone like Lord Pech to frequent. Disgusted with the double-cross and her sour luck, she’d decided to drink. She would have decided to drink anyway, but it never hurt to have a good excuse.

Weary, she pushed herself to sitting. Too quickly, and her head spun, the price of her good excuses. Xiala gripped her skull with both hands, willing the world to steady. The skin on her knuckles pulled painfully, and she looked at her right hand to find them swollen and red. She must have hit someone, but for all the cacao in Cuecola, she couldn’t remember who. The toothless woman laughed harder.

Shaking her sore hand out and pointedly ignoring her amused cellmate, Xiala got to her feet. She ran questing fingers over her clothes, taking stock of what she was missing. Her dagger, which was no surprise. Her small purse, also not surprising. But she still had the clothes on her back and the sandals on her feet, and she told herself to be grateful for that. There had been a time or two she had come out of a drunken night with less.

She stepped over the sleeping figures around her, not bothering to mouth apologies when she accidentally trod on a hand or kicked a turned back. Most of the women didn't notice, still sleeping or inebriated into oblivion. Xiala licked her dry, cracked lips. She wouldn't mind a drink right now herself. *No*, she told herself. *Didn't we just establish drinking is what landed you here to begin with? No more drink. And no more merchant lords.*

She threw that last one in for good measure, but she knew neither resolution would hold for long. She was a sailor, after all, and sailors relied on both merchant lords and alcohol to survive.

She reached the slatted door and tentatively tested it to see if it would give. It didn't, so she pressed her face through the spaces between the bars, peering around the early-morning darkness. She faced a courtyard. The lack of light outside obscured the details, turning the building across from her into a rectangular stone block and the open space between them an empty hole. To her left and right stretched more cells, but she couldn't tell if they were occupied or not. Either way, she seemed to be the only soul awake. Except for the woman who had laughed at her, of course.

She could still hear the fruit sellers, but they were fainter now, having moved on. Instead, her ears filled with the rustle of the wind through the palms and the familiar cries of chachalacas waking in their nests. The air was scented with the lingering aroma of freshly pulped papaya, spindly night-bloomers, and over all of it, the salty tang of the sea.

The sea.

The very thought was a comfort. When she was on the sea, she was happiest. The problems of the land, of jails and lords, didn't exist. If she could get back on a ship, everything would be all right.

But first she had to get out of here.

"Guards!" she shouted, squinting into the darkness. She couldn't see anyone, but there had to be guards. She banged a flat hand against the slats. They didn't budge. She yelled again, but only the birds and the wind answered her. She needed something that would make some noise, that would draw attention. She had nothing on her but her clothes—black trousers that flared out to cleverly resemble the skirts that were more socially acceptable for Cuecolan women and a woven striped huipil, tied tight at her waist with a fringed scarf that trailed over one hip. None of it useful for making noise.