

Raven Cries War - First Look

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Also by C.M. Banschbach

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RAVEN CRIES WAR

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Prelude

I was a child when the world ended. I don't remember it, or any time before the Sauvan ships crashed. They'd been cast off from their empire of faraway stars and found their way to our lands.

Our skies were the first thing to fight back.

I don't remember the swathes cut through the earth from crashing ships, the tidal waves that swept overland from their impact into the seas. It threw everything into disarray. Kingdoms braced as the surviving Sauvan stepped off their ships and brought strange sicknesses and more war with them.

It was clear they were used to ruling. And with their sharper, more accurate weapons, their gliders and resilient armor, they dug in to stay. This wide continent that was once three kingdoms is now under their control. Kings and ruling bloodlines were wiped out, and any remaining went deep into hiding.

It's been twenty-five years. They are here to stay. Once languages were learned, they claimed it was because our earth both held them prisoner, and didn't hold the resources for them to repair their ships and leave. That might be true. I also think that it's easy for them here.

Easy, except for us.

The ones who refuse to bow, who refuse to accept that this is the way of it now. The ones living on the fringes, deep in the mountains, tiny pockets of rebellion and safe haven. Remnants of bloodlines past, nurturing hope for the future.

My people aren't the only ones. There are other clans scattered across what remains of our country. But we're divided, not just by miles but by ideology. Some look inward, turning their backs on other rebels. Others try to burn themselves out in the same flames they light on the Sauvan. We're no better than the kingdoms who wouldn't—or couldn't—stop the tides.

We need to change. I need us to change. I might not remember the time before, but after almost thirty years of living, I don't know anymore what sort of future we can hope for beyond this.



Chapter 1

Enver

The skeleton of a Sauvan ship lies in the distance. Whatever is left of it has long since been ravaged by both its people and ours. My mare shifts beneath me as we consider it. The wind whipping around us brings its sense of wrongness to prick my skin. If we were to ride closer, I'd see the metal overgrown and rusting, likely only another year or two away from complete collapse. But from here it still stands tall, looming over the barren hills where wildflowers have dared to grow back among the rough heather.

"If only glaring at ghosts made them all go away," a deep voice chuckles at my side.

I shift in the saddle, inhaling to break the thrall the sight had over me, and look to my left. Burim's stocky frame slouches in his saddle, one hand gripping the reins, the other resting on the strap of his rifle.

If glaring could drive off ghosts, Burim would have managed it all himself years ago.

"They done?" I ask, tilting my head behind us.

He twists with a creak of armor.

“It takes more than five minutes,” snaps Sumi’s more irate voice before Burim can say anything. I smile and wheel my mount to face the two men crouched in the shadow of the crumbling tower. She snorts, shaking her thick mane in brief resistance, but comes in a neat about-face, hooves settling once more into the soft earth.

The same heavy clouds that threw rain and cold at us over the last two days of riding still linger above us. The wind has been just as dour, trying to cut through armor and clothes without stop.

Zef sighs and nudges his elbow against the side of the man next to him. “King Raven is getting restless.”

Burim chuckles and I roll my eyes at the title. Sumi and Zef keep working to repair the antenna. More mounted warriors range about in a loose semi-circle, and one yawns where he holds his, Zef’s, and Sumi’s horses.

This was once a watchtower keeping guard at edge of an old baron’s boundary, making sure that no danger would come from the forested hills behind us. Once our people would have manned it. Now we’re the danger in the hills. But we’ve kept the sensor and relay antennae in repair, feeding it to our worn-down hub to keep the ability to communicate with others and attempt to keep an eye on what moves. Which is not much in this stretch. Even the Sauvan don’t regularly haunt these hills.

The wind gusts again, bringing that same sense of *wrong* with it. I frown. It hadn’t come from the warship behind me. It had come from the forest.

“Enver?” Burim questions and the men still.

I shake my head. Silence lingers around the ten of us. I inhale again, letting my senses expand and connect with the invisible lifelines of my men, the wind, the blades of grass, the rustling trees. But nothing stirs

except us.

Yet something is still wrong. The threads wouldn't be telling me otherwise. I dismount, handing off the rein leathers to Burim. He grumbles, but doesn't argue. I steady the sword at my hip and rifle across my back before waving to one of the riders. He turns his mount to the keeping of the man next to him.

I pause until he jogs over, steadying the long-bladed lance across his back. The collar of his grey jacket is tucked up tight against the wind, but the constant rush has left his high cheekbones with a ruddy tint we all share. Even though the sun's been sporadic, it's still managed to turn his skin a shade darker than the rest of us. Ylli stays a half-step from my left as I lead the way toward the forest. Light thuds fall behind us as men and horses come into a tighter circle. Nothing moves ahead.

"You feel it?" I ask softly. Every step we take only increases the feeling.

"Yes," he whispers back. Ylli is a threadweaver like me, his strength lying more in premonitions brought by stirring threads. He unslings the lance as we walk, his hands settled along the haft of metal and polished wood. The blade echoes the sword on my hip. Dull grey with lighter channels inlaid. Once threads are gathered and sent through the blade, the channels will glow and the blades will cut through anything. Once the Sauvan realized that our planet Vellinor hummed with an energy they couldn't sense, an energy our threadweavers could wield against them, they began to systematically hunt down and wipe us out.

Ten paces into the forest, we find why the threads were calling.

And my heart sinks all the way to my toes. A threadblade is rammed into a tree, and among the roots lies what's left of a body. A soft curse whispers from Ylli, followed immediately by an apology to the gods for speaking so.

Time and the elements have started their work, but enough remains to mark a young woman. Loam has started to creep over her, trying to give the decency of a burial, but it's not enough to hide the bloodstains across her fading clothes.

Ylli crouches and gently presses fingertips to her forearm. He doesn't flinch. He's only a year or two my younger, but just as acquainted with death and misery.

"Threadweaver," he confirms after a moment. We're born with the connection to the earth's threads, and the connection lingers on after death until we're fully reabsorbed back into the ever-weaving patterns.

From the way she lies, from the scoring on the tree trunks, from the way the blade is rammed almost to the hilt in the tree, she was chased here and tried to make a stand. And this blade was her one last act of defiance.

The Sauvan have no control over the threads. They can't feel them at all, but still claim it was threads that caused them to crash and prevented them from leaving. In their hands, threadblades are just swords. Still sharp and dangerous, but not as exacting. When a threadweaver places their sword somewhere, tying its core to the substance around it, only another threadweaver can undo it.

I slip the fingerless glove off my hand and grip the hilt. Vibrant light tinges the bit of exposed blade as I call threads. I close my eyes, letting them speak to me of the chaotic last moments before she died. Threads remember. The connection I have, that Ylli has, we're just one part of the tapestry that weaves around us past, present, and future.

So I listen. Voices, blaster-fire, steel clashing. A rending cry that cuts off. It pierces my heart and I yank the sword free. The threads quiet instantly, gleaming white in the blade before I gently pull them back to

my hand.

“Look.” Ylli deftly scoops a tarnished necklace off the woman’s chest. It’s a stylized wolf. “She was far from home.”

The Wolves run the southern hills, miles from here, where saltgrass and ocean meet and tall cliffs try to barricade the land from the water. They call us Ravens, with our dark armor, swift mounts, and harbingers of death when our people are threatened. It’s like with the Sauvan coming, we were cast back to the individual clans we used to be, generations and generations ago before kingdom lines were drawn and cities settled.

“How long do you think?” I ask.

He lifts a shoulder and pushes back to standing. “Two weeks? Maybe?”

I think back to the voices I’d heard in the threads. They were rough, but didn’t hold the sharp edge of the Sauvan tongue. Dead thread-weavers are painful to see, even harder when it was your own people who killed them.

“Sounded like bounty hunters,” I say, tilting the sword. He curses again and lifts his eyes heavenward. Much more and he’s going to sleep in the gods-cave in penance when we return home. Something catches his eye on the ground, and he picks up a broken knife with a tusk hilt, anger sharply creasing his narrow face.

“Boars.”

I spit to the side. Not rebels, but not civilized. They were once herds-men in the mountains, already living on the edges of society. Now they’re mercenaries who take the handouts from the Sauvan in some sort of superstitious fear, claiming the gods and their threads forsook us when they didn’t stop the ships’ arrival. Now they decorate their bodies in some mimicry of the Sauvan and in homage of the boars who run the

far northern hills. The one, small mercy is that the threads seem to have forsaken any Boar born after the invasion.

A muted call comes from the weaver's direction and I exchange places with Ylli. Her boots seemed like they had been sturdy, her trousers and long jacket thick enough to withstand the elements. But not much longer. Even with the evidence of battle and her violent death, there's still something peaceful about the way she lies, and what expression I can find on her fading face framed in chin-length hair.

The silvery sound comes again, drawing my focus from the few bright stitches of her tunic to the necklace. *Take it*, the threads seem to say.

I pivot and glance to Ylli. He nods, confirming he heard the same. A distant look falls over his eyes and then he nods more firmly. "We need it. Something's coming."

There's no point in asking for more information. He'd have told me if he knew. I tuck the blade under my arm, pinning it against my side as I lean forward, pulling gently on the chain to find the clasp and free it.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to her, then slip the necklace into my pants pocket as I stand. "You think she was chasing threads?" I ask.

"Don't think like that, Enver," Ylli warns.

Maybe he's already put the timeline together too. Two weeks ago, this relay had gone out. It had taken time to gather the supplies, but two Sauvan patrols trying to probe into our territory had taken precedent before we could turn our attention here. Almost a month ago, I'd removed my gloves in a fight and used threadweaving in a way that's sure to have the bounty on my head even higher.

Maybe she destroyed the marker, hoping to pull us out. Maybe it failed on its own and it was chance that brought us out here. Or maybe she felt the echo of what I'd done weeks ago and decided to come find me or any

of the other threadweavers in our ranks.

“I already am,” I say, and wave my hand in a scooping motion, using threads to kick up more leaves and loam over her body to cover and let her rest deeper in the earth to finish giving her threads back in some semblance of peace.

She deserves more than this. More than me taking her blade because we need it, and her necklace because the threads wanted us to. But here we are, and here she’ll lie forever. Maybe one day, she’ll have vengeance.

We make our way back. One glance at the new blade in my hand and Burim shakes his head, his craggy features settling into a deeper frown. Zef and Sumi are mounted again. I loosen a buckle from the back of my saddle and slide the blade through the bedroll’s coils.

I swing into the saddle and reclaim the reins from Burim.

“Boars have been around.”

Scowls and imprecations greet my announcement. “Threadweaver looked like a Wolf,” I say, and more than one eyebrow goes up. As far as we know, the Wolves only have one threadweaver, and her death on Raven lands might lead to a fight.

“Threadchasing?” Zef asks, and Sumi leans over to smack his arm. Zef just lifts his shoulders, the question still there.

“I don’t know,” I say. The tightness of the words doesn’t go unmarked by anyone. “But Ylli thinks something’s coming.”

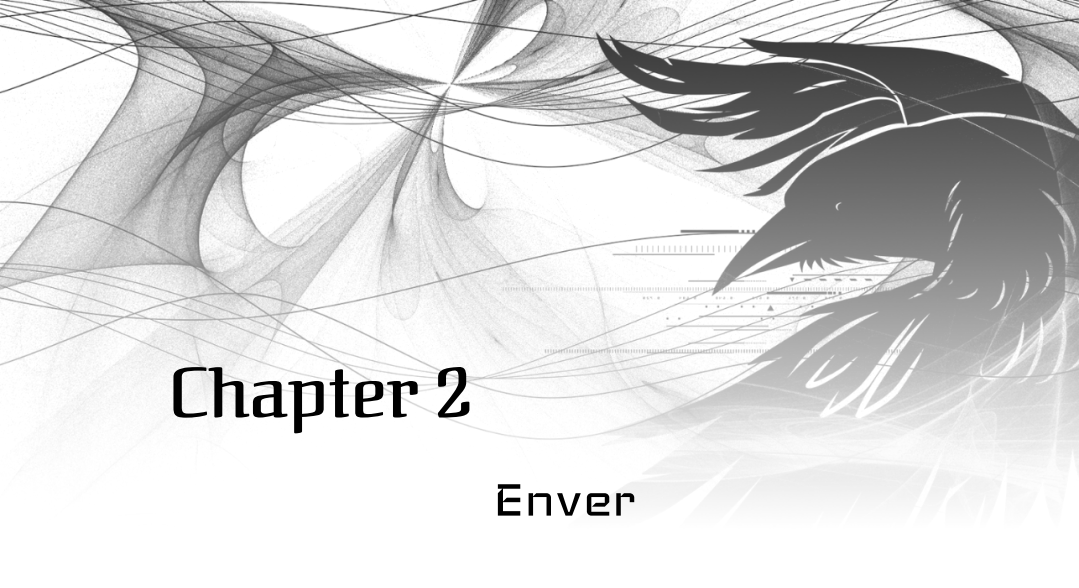
Namik, the youngest of our troop, gives a mysterious “ooh!”, but even he knows not to question Ylli. The threadweaver just smiles slightly at Namik and adjusts his lance.

“But until then, we keep riding.”

This relay sits at the westernmost point of our territory. It’s miles back to the heart we carved in the mountains, and there are a few villages to

check along the way.

I nudge my mare forward and the rest fall into a loose double line with me, Burim still faithfully at my right. Ylli takes the rear, spreading out the threadweavers and letting his skill fill the wind behind us, making sure there's no pursuit as we keep on through the lonely hills.



Chapter 2

Enver

The villages in the nebulous border between our territory and Sauvan controlled lands are nothing more than scraps of metal and wood clustered on either side of a swathe of dirt. They're populated by the fringes—the ones who didn't want to stay in the ever-growing cities, or couldn't afford to. And the ones who are too frightened to leave everything and join a rebel faction. Better to live a half-life on the edges than face sure death in the wilds.

I can't blame them. Rebellion is all I've ever known, its danger always a breath behind me. But even if it wasn't, I don't think I would have suffered long in these collections of tin and splintering wood.

We dismount, and leave the horses with five men. The others trail after me, rifles or handguns within easy reach. I'm the only one without a weapon in hand, but the gloves stay on, only the tips of my fingers free to tangle among the invisible threads.

There are maybe a hundred people here, and a fraction of them gather in the center square in some semblance of a trade market with the outlying herders and farmers. The rain came again in the early morning, and

its chill still clings tight. Twenty-five years, and the weather is the only thing unbothered by the Sauvan as it continues to choose its own ways despite the oncoming spring.

We keep to the edges, though it's not like we fit in with our dark grey armor encasing chests and limbs. We're not the only ones with jacket collars turned up, or caps tucked tight over ears against the cool. Even the thick-wooled sheep cluster together, tails to the wind.

This village is too small for Sauvan presence, but they have other ways of retaining control. Zef's job is watching the sky for their unmanned scout gliders while I move forward to greet a man with silver sprinkling his hair. Burim is my constant shadow, the way his father protected my father. Some roles are still inherited.

"Enver." The townhead ducks a nod, the action not quite masking his look around. Making sure we have a few moments before we're fully noticed. I like him, only because he hasn't started using the *King Raven* moniker yet.

"News?" I ask.

He crosses his arms over broad chest. The sleeves of his jacket are starting to fray, and his boots are wearing. Mud seems to constantly coat everything. He looks no better or worse than anyone else here.

"They drove through here two days ago reminding us of the harvest tithe. Said they might need more workers for the city harvests." He shrugs, like it doesn't matter, but bitterness tucks tight around his mouth.

"Who's leaving?" I ask.

His posture slumps just a fraction. "Two families are talking about taking it up. Say maybe it doesn't matter where we live meagerly."

Half-life on the edge of the wilds, or a half-life on the edge of the city

where there's maybe a chance to make more money, feel a little safer without the constant wind and rebels bringing the continual threat of more Sauvan attention.

"I won't stop them," I say, reading the unspoken question furrowing between his eyes. It deepens. Maybe he hoped I would. Wouldn't leave them short of hands for what harvest they'd scrape. Wouldn't leave fewer bodies to try to defend their scraps when bands like the Boars rode through.

"Then when are you going to do something?" he snaps, then draws back afraid. I don't shift, and neither does Burim. "Sorry, Enver," he mutters.

Many people have started to look at me like I might be a king. The townhead might not be using the title, but he's also begun treating me like one. Remembering too that my father's name was once preceded by "Baron," and that even though my ancestral lands are far from here and firmly controlled by the Sauvan, I'm three things. A rebel, a thread-weaver, and someone with power as both.

But there are no barons anymore, and Ravens only desperately guard what we've carved out over the last years. Offensive strikes against the Sauvan sometimes feel like they might also be a thing of the past. These small villages see us more often than the Sauvan that they're starting to question in the dubious peace.

I muster a smile. "No hard feelings."

Burim shifts ever so slightly. Threads stir around him, but I don't need them to know that he'll hold the grudge for me.

"Where is he?" A shout yanks our attention to the far end of the square. A woman stumbles forward, feet catching each dip in the mud until her wild eyes find me. Then she's sprinting, and only my out-

stretched hands and the man's strength keep her from crashing into me.

"They took my boy, Raven. You have to get him back." Her hands slick over the tough weave of my armor. "Please, you have to get him back."

"Start over," I soothe, my fingers catching the back of her hand and squeezing gently.

Tears spill from her dark eyes. "Those monsters... He's a threadweaver. We didn't know until we saw him weaving blocks into a tower a few weeks ago. Someone told them..." She shakes her head, lips pressing tight.

I glance to the man.

"Loud mouths have already been silenced," he confirms tightly. I want to curse, but this justice is all we have anymore.

"He's barely nine years. They took him," she quavers. "Please..."

I gently release her hands. The threadweavers the Sauvan don't kill are taken to heavily guarded research facilities, filled with their learning and ours. The only ones who walk out are the broken ones in new Sauvan armor. The closest facility is miles outside our territory. If the boy had just been taken and there was a chance to catch them on the road? Maybe. But he's long gone, and I can already predict the casualties, the risks of overextending past the territory we *can* control...

"Enver." Burim tugs his rifle strap, shoulders settling. He'll move if I give the command. But we've been in this position before, the two of us, and shared loss is carved in deep scars.

Cold certainty twines around me. We can't risk so much for just one boy. The mother's face crumples and she leans on the man before I muster the words.

"Mama!" A boy no more than five slips through the gathering crowd and latches onto her leg. He regards me with a defiance that will get him

in trouble one day. And I know.

I sink slowly down to a crouch, resting forearms on my legs. I extend my hand, and he regards it before slowly reaching out and touching my fingers.

Threads lighten and dance at the contact.

I withdraw and glance to the mother. "Both your boys are weavers?" I ask.

"No, just..." She falters, looking at her son in mounting horror.

"He said never to tell anyone," the boy whispers.

I push back to my feet and Burim curses for the both of us, though there's no apology sent the gods' way after.

"Maybe they'll let him go when they realize he doesn't have the power," I say. It's a faint hope, but more than she had moments before. Her eyes dull, giving up on both of her sons for a heartrending second before she looks to me again.

"Take him with you." She puts her hand on the child's shoulder, ready to push him to me.

"I can't," I say. We've miles more to ride, and I won't rip a child from his mother.

"You have to. He's one of you!" Both her hands grab her son, almost shaking him. Fear twists his face.

"Bring him yourself." I forestall her next frantic words.

"I can't!" she says. "We..." She casts her hand to the village.

"What do you have here that you can't have in the mountains?" Burim asks.

"I'm not a rebel," she whispers.

Many aren't until they've lost enough. The rest turn to that path to protect everyone they can. My parents were the latter, believing in their

duty to me as a young threadweaver and the people they once governed. And now I'm both of those, and cannot bear to see more loss in front of me again.

"No," I say. "You're a mother. We'll keep ears out for your other son. But take this one and whoever else you have and head for the boundaries. We'll make sure someone is there to meet you."

"I..."

"You can," the townhead says gruffly. He loops an arm around her shoulder. "We'll help you all get packed and headed in the right direction." He gives me a nod. The woman looks back once more, and it's the look of countless mothers, desperate for some glimpse of hope that I can't give her.

It scores sharp like a threadblade, and I retreat before it. Burim's solitary tread follows behind, waiting as I close my eyes for a long moment, trying to draw in a breath around the tightness in my jaw. I force them open and face the ongoing reality.

"Enver," Burim starts. I know from the line of his mouth that he's weighing if he should argue for moving.

"It's too far for one boy," I say the things he knows. "The last times people have asked for rescue only ended in betrayal and death."

I don't want to bring out the memory of his father, dead after a threadweaver asked for help and ambush was all that awaited. He doesn't flinch before the reminder.

"We don't have enough for a strike." Safety for hundreds of others relies on offensive fights only when necessary.

"We could," he says resolutely. His dark eyes dare me to remember how I was years ago, how I wouldn't have hesitated. But I haven't been that naïve self in a long time.

“We can’t risk it. We have to protect our borders.” Protect the safest haven rebels have in the northwest. A home for another young threadweaver spirited from his town by parents who weren’t rebels either until they glimpsed their son’s power. Even still, the question tugs my mind.

If the missing boy was a threadweaver, would I go?

“Border hasn’t changed in a year.” Burim’s wind-creased face doesn’t accuse, but the words still prod. We’ve held the line, so when do we start to look outward again?

For a moment, a long-suppressed side of me comes to the surface. The one whose voice cried for action and not for caution like it does now. One who’d ride for another threadweaver with barely a second thought. Before I was handed responsibility I didn’t want, grief I can’t shake, but still holding the same anger that churns deep inside.

“It’s been triage for survival,” I say almost defensively. “It’s always been triage.” Helpless, always feeling a fraction too late, focused on bringing safety first for the hundreds of lives depending on me. Adding more when I can, but always worrying that all I do is pack more gauze on a fatal injury, too blinded to see the truth. We are dying, and maybe one day I’ll open my eyes and stop limping a way forward.

Burim sweeps around in front of me, his hands descending on my shoulders to lightly shake. “I know, Enver, but...” His voice dips between us.

“When do we stop *hemorrhaging*?” I hiss, more than just my voice shaking.

His hand scoops around my neck and tugs me closer. “I know.” He jostles me lightly. “Courage, King Raven.”

I brace a fist against the rough weave of his armor. “Shut up.”

Burim chuckles and nudges me back, but I’m steadier as I lead the

way back to the horses. *Courage, Enver*. It's what my father reminded me many times before his lifeline snapped out in a battle. What my mother whispered before another wave of Sauvan-brought sickness took her. What mentors and elders and Burim say, and what shines in everyone else's eyes when they look at me. I might carry courage for us all, but it doesn't seem like hope and I are on speaking terms.