The Battle of the United Lions



A novel by Shahriyar Eghdam Shargh

Chapter One

At long last, The Pale disk shows on the horizon.

The artist of our world was determined to paint reality to whatever the darkness before it had robbed from the people every time the daytime called it.

The Pale disk never failed to bring hope to the world of the living, and it had done so for so long that the people thought it was its duty to do so.

"If a privilege is repeated often enough, the people will take it for granted," said a man looking out the window.

Some say the Pale disk watches over everything at the same time.

But this time, it turned around to see the man who was awake long before its arrival.

Once the light traveled distant enough, it found a man in a window in a realm called Orinthal.

Long grey hair, beard of black decorated with a district of white, and eyes so sharp that the

Pale disk hardly found the courage to look into.

This was no ordinary man.

So the Pale disk had to investigate what its brush touched today.

As the light found the heart to crawl out of its shields, the vision was clearer.

A freshly forged medal shone on the man's unique uniform.

Once the light got closer, it found a banner mark on the man's chest.

The Grey Falcon badge shone silver on his person.

This badge was a sign of the eldest member of the Varesh house, or perhaps the most capable.

They say you should look into a person's eyes if you desire to truly know them, so the Pale disk did the same.

As the light granted the man's eyes the color of light green, the light made sure of his identity.

King Aldren Varesh held his ground on the highest floor of Orinthal's fortress.

Aldren was no more than twenty-five when he found himself in the middle of a battlefield.

Therefore, he never had the chance to be royalty. He was more of a general than a king.

"Sir?" A familiar voice called from behind.

Aldren turned to make sure who called his name.

Lord Garran Veyr awaited his presence in the doorway.

Lord Garran was a trusted friend of Aldren's father, Roderic Varesh.

He was a minister of his father's, and remained true to him until his final day.

"Sir?" Lord Garran asked in a sharper tone once he found Aldren's frozen, silent stare.

"Oh," Aldren spoke, "Yes, yes."

"We must leave," he responded, "Now."

Aldren was ready to go at first light, but something kept him in his chamber that morning.

Today he faced something he knew nothing about.

A company of four joined the harmony of their steps as soon as the two walked out the door.

Orinthal's boots were loyal to their king, but Aldren was of more importance to them since they knew he was no king to hide behind the lines when fate demands his attention.

"How do you do, captain?" Aldren turned around to greet the soldiers.

"All is good, your majesty," the captain responded.

"And you?" Aldren turned to the soldiers.

"All is good, sir!" The men roared, sticking their spears to the ground twice.

"How are the ships?" Lord Garran asked the captain.

"We are ready to sail, sir," the captain responded, "As you requested."

Their boots marked the ground soon enough.

Orinthal was a beautiful realm of windy weather, located on high mountains.

It was not as gifted as the other realms when it came to resources, but house Varesh held the crown for generations for a reason.

They found a way around the lack of resources to keep the bellies fed and the hands working.

Aldren, like all of his predecessors, realized his knowledge was just a drop in the ocean.

Regardless of his vast learning, he remained acutely aware of his own ignorance.

The Varesh house had never been in a war before, so they never trained for one.

They trained their heir to be an excellent merchant, not a warrior.

But lucky for them, Aldren had the spirit of a warrior and the mind of a merchant.

When the first armies set eyes on Orinthal, he used the higher ground as an advantage.

Walls were built around the mountains, traps were set, and guards were placed.

He defended the walls with a handful of men.

When he succeeded, more and more joined his army.

Aldren knew every battle that ever occurred in history. He studied them when he had the chance.

Time proved his passion had purpose.

Orinthal was considered an easy target in the first strikes.

An isolated realm with almost no army and no defensive systems.

But Aldren was their savior. His tactics did not require hands or wealth. He relied on knowledge.

He knew exactly how to defend the realm he called home.

Once Nivarash's army failed to climb, Varuktesh sent for peace. They had nothing against Orinthal, and they had already lost so many resources.

The streets were almost crowded that day, the stalls were busy.

Aldren analyzed his surroundings for hidden details.

A man who stood too close to a stall that sold food.

A woman who started a fight to get the advantage of distraction aligned with her intentions.

"At least our people have enough wealth to fill their bellies still," Lord Garran whispered to Aldren.

"No," Aldren replied, his head down.

"How do you mean?" Lord Garran responded.

"Look." Aldren pointed at a little boy picking an apple off the side of a stall when the woman was screaming on the other side of the street.

"Stealing is a crime!" Lord Garran said.

But when he wanted to turn around to order the soldiers for the boy to be punished, Aldren grabbed his hand.

"Stealing food is not a crime," he whispered, "It's instinct."

"What?" Lord Garran said, "What do you mean, your majesty?"

"The one who steals food is no thief," he responded calmly, "But hungry is all."

"So what do you suggest?" Lord Garran said, annoyed.

"Offer the king's courtesy." Aldren pointed at a caravan nearby.

"Very well then," Lord Garran said, "As you wish."

Lord Garran ordered the soldiers to grab a sack of gold and approach the stalls unnoticed to buy their day's worth of material.

Some took the gold and went home, but some refused to accept.

Aldren was observant. His only difference with an ordinary citizen was the badge on his silk.

He always wore his armor under a regular long cloak.

Telling him apart from an ordinary man was a difficult task for most, especially the ones blinded by greed.

"This for a day's worth of fish?!" A salesman shouted at Lord Garran, "You know how hard it was for me to catch these fish in a war?"

Aldren watched from afar, but when he saw this, he approached the stall.

"It is not fair to the people to charge five times the price of fish in wartime, sir," he said politely.

"What do you know of the effort I put in providing my supplies, peasant?!" The salesman shouted again.

The captain grabbed the hilt of his sword and pulled it forward. The sword showed through the cloak.

The salesman was frightened once he saw the mark of the law on the sword.

He knew he had insulted a member of the fortress, but still had no idea who.

"Lower your weapon, captain," Aldren put his hand on the captain's sword, "I refuse to let my name be called among the monsters."

"You are..." The salesman asked, frightened, eyes wide.

"Yes." Aldren smiled, nodding.

"My apologies, your majesty," he bowed, "I did not see the sign."

"A banner mark must not change a man's attitude, sir," Aldren said calmly, "You shall be

punished by the law if I hear you sell fish for more than the price the fortress announced."

"Understood, my king." He said, still bowing.

"Accept what fate granted you," Aldren continued, "Go home to your family."

The Bazar was too crowded for the event to be noticed. Everyone had a task of their own.

Caring for an empty stomach was more urgent than noticing a king in the crowd.

"Why not have him punished?" Lord Garran asked a few steps ahead, "Your father would have made a lesson out of him."

"My father never ruled in the time of war," Aldren looked him in the eyes, "We must act patiently if we care for my name to remain as it should."

"War or peace," Lord Garran said, "You must punish one of these people one of these days."

"I have never seen a familiar face commit the same crime twice," Aldren said in a lower voice, "Every man must be granted the chance to best his instincts."

"No matter how evil they are?" Lord Garran asked.

"For generations, we have claimed the mind is stronger than instinct," Aldren said calmly, "Why turn away from our own claim?"

"As you wish," Lord Garran said, satisfied.

"Call the king's courtesy when I walk away," Aldren said, stepping out of the crowd alone.

"People of Orinthal!" A soldier called, removing his cloak once the minister signed.

Everyone stiffened when they saw the uniform, and the street went silent.

"The king has bought you food for the day," Lord Garran called, "Gather what you need and go home."

"Praise be upon our king!" A woman screamed, crying.

"Long live the king!" A child shouted.

Lord Garran and the soldiers joined Aldren in a corner where he was standing.

"Look." Aldren pointed at the same child who stole an apple putting it back, "See?"

"A child's intentions are not to be compared with a grown man's," Lord Garran said.

"But a child will grow into one." Aldren smiled at him.

Lord Garran was not a harsh man, but he was strict, even stern at times.

So the soldiers were amused that the king silenced him with logic rather than authority, even though he had the power to.

"If you continue these acts of charity," Lord Garran said, "Your house will go broke."

"What's the point of living in a palace if your name is cursed for eternity?" Aldren said.

"The people will not spare you anything if you starve," Lord Garran said, frowning, "Why do you invest in something you know fails?"

"I am their caretaker," Aldren took a deep breath, "And this is their wealth."

"Your caretaker would have highly disapproved of this if he were to be among the living," Lord Garran said.

"I am not my father!" Aldren shouted, making a fist.

The soldiers never saw him raise his voice. They stopped.

"I do not mean to question your acts, son," Lord Garran said, "I ask you to question your own."

"I will try." Aldren smiled and kept walking.

The Pale disk granted shape to a magnificent ship made of pumice, shining a yellowish light grey under the light.

The soldiers were already there, the resources were gathered, and the ship was already floating on the water.

"Welcome, your majesty." A soldier greeted the king's presence, "Everything is as you ordered."

"Excellent lad," Aldren said, "Board the ship, we will join shortly."

"Yes sir." The soldier roared, signaling to the other soldiers to board.

It was almost midmorning. They had to be in Zarim by the afternoon.

Everyone boarded the ship to their chambers. All the men were tired of all their tasks since morning light fondled their faces.

So Aldren found a chance to be alone on the water.

"What's on your mind, son?" Lord Garran asked, touching his shoulder.

"I'm afraid," Aldren said, staring at the horizon.

"Of what?" He responded.

"This is the largest negotiation in history," he said, looking him in the eyes, "And I'm not reading it on paper."

"I trust you will make it worth their while," Lord Garran said.

"Of whom?" Aldren asked, confused.

"Of the readers that will read your story on paper," Lord Garran replied.

They both stared at the horizon, the Pale disk stared back at them...

Chapter Two

By the time the scopes saw the Tree of Zarim, the eyes saw tragedies on water.

The Pale disk granted color to the sinking ships that weren't more than a few days old.

It seemed as if the soldiers never cared that this day was set for the negotiation of peace.

"Hold the ship!" Roared Garran from the upper deck.

"What is the problem?" Aldren called.

"The sunken ships formed a barricade my king." Lord Garran said.

When Aldren climbed to see what held them back from reaching the negations, he saw a series of unknown banners dancing in the wind.

"These are not royal banners." He said with lower voice to Garran.

"Yes my king," Lord Garran shouted deafened by the tides, "I haven't seen any royal houses that carry these banners."

"All the soldiers have been informed of the negotiations," Aldren said, "There are to be no clash of armies in this time."

Lord Garran signed that he cannot hear his words.

"I said there are to be no wars at the time of the negotiations!" Aldren shouted.

"These are not soldier banners either." Lord Garran shouted again.

"Who performed total war on waters first light then?" Aldren called.

"Pirates your majesty." Lord Garran whispered close to his ear.

"Pirates?" Aldren murmured.

"You see that black banner with a vulture on it son?" Lord Garran asked.

"Yes." Aldren nodded.

"That is the Zhurak clan banner." Lord Garran said.

"So?" Aldren asked. "We have fought tens of clans so far."

"Remember the time when your father sickened?" Lord Garran said in a quieter tone.

"Yes," He whispered back, "Why are we whispering?"

"We were ambushed by this clan on the water that night," Lord Garran said, "These men are young enough to not recognize the banner mark but they know enough to fear the name Zhurak."

"But i have something to fear far worse than a clan's name." Aldren said.

"What is more frightening to a realm than a clan who hunted their king to his death?" Lord Garran asked.

"What pinned their banner to the water."

Aldren looked him in the eyes.

Lord Garran's eyes widened when the king's words setteled.

"Send men to investigate why those ships sunk." Aldren said.

"Right away your majesty." Lord Garran pointed to two soldiers to climb to that ship.

Once the men left, the two stared at the horizon again.

The path was blocked and they were already late to the negotiation meeting.

"What are those other banners?" Aldren pointed.

"I do not recognize those marks." Lord Garran said.

"Send word," Aldren said, "We can use clans that can fight on the water skilled enough to sink a feared ship."

"They did not survive the fight my king," Lord Garran said, "They fled the scene."

"You say these were pirate clans?" Aldren asked politely.

"There is no other possibility here your majesty." Lord Garran said.

"Then they were scared enough to leave the supplies afloat after the conflict." Aldren replied.

"Maybe they left after the looting," Lord Garran said, "Luck for us."

"Look." Aldren pointed at the men returning to the ship.

"We found these chests of gold coins my lord." The captain said to lord Garran.

Garran opened the chests to check, they were right, there were royal coins in the chests.

"Hm," Lord Garran said, "Mark of a Heron."

"Anything of value?" Aldren said.

"Yes my king," Lord Garran said, "These can fund an army."

It was almost the afternoon, the Pale disk was almost in its orange silk.

The light was folding, and the water was darkening.

This was no time to be afloat for a royal ship, these were not safe times.

Soldiers may obey, but there lots of scavengers that sought dark times to take advantage of the opportunities they saw.

The pirate clans were more active at night times, there were almost no royal ships on the water at that time, so there was no danger for them.

Merchant ships were easy loots for them when there were no military ships around.

They sometimes allied with some military ships to turn a blind eye on their acts for a good profit.

But these alliances never worked for the benefit of the pirates.

The soldiers who ignored their oath to serve and protect would almost certainly ignore a freshly formed alliance with a banner that the fortresses paid hefty bags to see their banners still.

Once Aldren gathered his attention, he found the ship moving again.

"The barricades have been dealt with your majesty," A captain said touching Aldren's arm, "We will set ashore to Zarim's docks soon enough."

"Thank you captain." Aldren smiled.

The Pale disk dragged its hand on the water, pushing their ships to clash on the harbor.

Zarim seemed exhausted now, all the armies that set sail on these shores left a mark of their own.

Bodies rotting in the sand, weapons abandoned to surrender to nature, and banners torn to pieces beyond recognition.

The shore of Zarim showed far a civilization so bright could fall, when time forces it to.

Aldren and Garran walked side by side, the soldiers followed their banner.

"Every path is blocked my lord." A soldier tapped Lord Garran on the shoulder.

"How would we make it to the Tree then?" Lord Garran asked.

"Sound the horns." Aldren said.

"That is madness," Lord Garran said, "They will attack first and look second if they suspect an ambush."

"Sound the horns captain," Aldren repeated, "They will see our banners."

The horns were sounded, the sound echoed in the abandoned Zarim.

Birds flew from their nests as soon as a sound broke the silence, suspecting the worst.

Every time a sound came, no one had the time to think it through, they only ran and hid.

Their experience showed this to be the wisest of choices.

A head popped up from the Tree, then another, and after a moment another showed.

"Royalty approach!" A soldier called from the top level of the Tree.

"Open the gates." Another uniform called.

The gates were made of wood, sharp ends to keep harm away and oiled bodies to keep nature away.

Inside the walls, Zarim seemed more civil.

No casualties showed, no fallen banners abandoned, and no free weapons for the sand.

"Welcome your majesty," A uniform approached, "This way."

The man's hair was grey and his eyes were tired, but he forced himself awake.

The war had drained every resource he seemed to posses, like all others around him.

The other soldiers were younger and in their battle armors, so the man ahead must have been more experienced.

"Thank you general." Aldren said once he reached the room.

The room was far away from civil, the voices clashed inside.

But the door was trust worthy enough to not let any details out except for the violence of the voices inside.

"Oh, I'm just a soldier milord." The soldier replied opening the door.

Aldren tapped his shoulder and proceeded inside.

The room went silent when the new members of the war joined.

Every set of eyes analyzed the new warriors.

The room was crowded, there were royalties, uniforms, and even ministers.

"Welcome," A man coughed from the far end of the room, "Have a seat."

Maelor Kalthaer was now showing signs of age, not only illness.

He had short sparse hair, and a mustache to hide his scars.

His face was crowded with wrinkles and for some, age was not responsible.

Once the members of Orinthal's representatives were seated, the battle went on.

"You had no right to attack my ships," A man shouted, "They were only escorting my merchants."

"Merchants don't need escorts if they are not carrying weapons!" A woman screamed in response.

"That is King Orzand of Deravshkar, and that is Queen Nivara of Sahradun." Lord Garran whispered in Aldren's ear.

"Surrender my demanding at once," A handsome man shouted in another end, "Why are you letting your people suffer?"

"Artamur will never let your soldiers claim our women you filthy pig," A uniform shouted back, "We will fight till the last man."

"As you wish!" The handsome fellow replied smiling.

"I know who they are." Aldren put his hand on Garran's shoulder.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please, this was set to be a civil negotiation!" An old man with a crown called.

The room went silent for a moment, King Varkan Marukhal of Urkashur and King Odran Eramushar of Artamur were still pointing at each other's faces with an aggressive frown when King Jaffarion of Tahl demanded a peaceful negotiation.

The side dedicated to Tahl's representatives was almost stripped of crowd.

The old king seemed to bring no more than two advisors, no uniforms, no spears and no royal members.

Just him and his two advisors.

Aldren noticed a fair shake on the obsidian table, there were a lot of hands on the table, but none were shaking.

on his right, there was a young man, too young to be a king.

He seemed stressed, he had signs of sweat on his shoulders and back.

His lips were dried, and his sleeve was torn.

He was so stressed that he did not notice his arm was bleeding.

He kept his eyes on the obsidian table and his lips sealed.

But something caught Aldren's sight when the young fellow turned back to listen to what one of his advisors had to say.

"Look." Aldren tapped Garran's knee.

"A Purple Heron?" Lord Garran asked.

"Like the one on the coins." Aldren smiled.

"That must be why he is so stressed," Lord Garran responded, "His father will be mad once he finds out he lost a ship of supplies."

"He sits in Varuktesh's corner," Aldren said, "If he was not the king, he wouldn't have been granted to take the seat."

"Newly crowned you say?" Lord Garran whispered locking eyes on the young man.

"Yes." Aldren nodded standing up.

"Where to?" Garran said, "Our seat is here!"

"To negotiate." Aldren said.

"Aldren!" Lord Garran shouted silently, "Aldren come back!"

Aldren ignored the traditions and took a few steps to reach the young man's corner.

"Greetings sir," Aldren extended his arm, "I am king Aldren Varesh of Orinthal."

"Hello sir," The young man said trembling, "I am Ravik Korvael of Varuktesh."

"Nice to meet you Prince Ravik." Aldren replied.

"King." A uniform behind him frowned.

"Oh," Aldren said, "My apologies, you are a young king then."

"Yes," Ravik replied shaking, "Yes I am."

"Something on your mind?" Aldren asked putting his hand on Ravik's wounded arm.

The young king pulled his arm as soon as he felt the pain.

"Yes," He replied, "We barely escaped."

"Escaped what?" Aldren asked.

"We were ambushed by a group of unknown banners," He replied, "They managed to sink two of our ships."

"Pirates?" Aldren asked, "We saw a series of wrecked ships on the way."

"Yes, yes." Ravik replied shocked, "They looked like pirates.

"My men found some of your supplies on the wrecked ships," Aldren responded politely, "I will have them sent to you first light."

"Gold?" Ravik asked with widened eyes.

"Yes." Aldren replied standing up to leave to his own corner.

"Why spread the word?" Ravik asked, "You could have kept them."

"I'm not wearing a pirate mark am i?" Aldren laughed.

"No, you are not?" Ravik smiled.

Aldren returned to his corner without raising any alarms.

"Anything?" Lord Garran asked.

"Yes." Aldren replied smiling.

The shouting was still in progress, peace was not at hand it seemed.

"Attention!" Aldren stood up from his seat shouting.

The room went silent, the eyes fixed on his grey silk decorated with dark grey leaves and branches.

The wind fondled his hair and the light brightened his eyes.

"Speak!" A man called from the far end of the room.

"This negotiation was a failure it seems so far," Aldren returned a sharp stare at the man, "Staying longer around this table would be nothing more than a waste of time."

"What do you suggest?" A woman called from a corner to his left.

"I suggest an alliance with whoever seeks to end this war for the better of us all and our people." He replied.

"An alliance?!" A man asked biting on a piece of meat.

"The tradition of the united lions implies that realms of wisdom shall unite under the Lion banner when the times are ruthless." Aldren replied.

A harsh sound of laughter mocked the king in the room.

"The tradition of the United Lions?" A fat man laughed collapsing on the table.

"Yes." Aldren replied.

"This unity is to be formed among clans not realms sir!" He said looking away.

"A Unity can be formed between any party of any reality." Aldren replied.

The man stiffened when his advisor tapped him on the shoulder nodding.

But King Thamir of Mirzun was to stubborn to admit he is wrong.

"This joke of an alliance was formed five times between multiple different clans across the world of the living," He continued, "And they failed to achieve their goals every time."

"What makes you think this time it would be different?" A woman asked, "This alliance is a curse to the ones that take its oath."

"I know where they made mistakes." Aldren said.

Silence claimed the room.

Eyes shifted between the members.

"Therefore i summon the Lion banner and establish the alliance of the united lions," Aldren continued, "Anyone who cares to join will be welcome to the fortress of Orinthal."

"You fool!" A uniform shouted.

"You brought a curse upon your realm!" A woman shouted.

"Nonsense." Aldren replied gathering his men.

Orinthal's party left the room, leaving their proposition to act as their representor.

It was almost night time as they walked toward their ship.

The night was calm and the Lunar was peaceful.

Lord Garran put his hand on Aldren's shoulder once the ship set sail.

"What in the eleven realms do you think you're doing summoning a curse on our people?!" He shouted.

"A curse?" Aldren laughed, "You disappoint me sometimes."

He tried to walk away but Lord Garran pulled him close.

"Twenty seven clans were perished under this forsaken banner son!" He said harshly, "What makes you think this is a blessing."

"It's not." Aldren replied calmly.

"Then what makes you summon it?!" Lord Garran asked.

"It's a proposal!" Aldren shouted pushing him away, "You are tired, go take some rest!"

"Fine!" He replied, "But don't expect me to stay along your side when your name is cursed along side all else who took this oath."

He turned away and slammed the door.

"What's that supposed to mean?!" Aldren shouted, "Don't make me question your loyalty!"

But Garran seemed to not care, he did not even care enough to reply the king.

The sail was silent, no one spoke.

Then a shake knocked Aldren off his feet as he was drowned in his thoughts still.

He did not notice when they reached home.

Aldren rushed to his chamber as soon as they reached the sand.

Lord Garran followed his boot marks to his chamber.

He did not want to leave his upset, not because he was the king but because he was almost a son to him.

He mentored his every act until this day, he passed him every book he read since he learned to walk.

So, Lord Garran rushed through the door without knocking.

"Listen son, i..." He tried to speak.

Aldren raised his hand requesting for his silence.

He was standing in the balcony, staring at the sea.

"Come." He said.

Lord Garran approached his side as he commanded to see something extra ordinary.

Two ships were approaching Orinthal's harbor.

They carried royal banners, they were not here for a fight, they came to negotiate.

Lord Garran was shocked by what he saw, the curse never attracted audience before that time, all who heard the Lion banner's name ran as far as they could.

"See?" Aldren smiled touching his shoulder.

The two stared at the night, as the Lunar encouraged its children to dance in the abyss we call the sky...

Chapter Three

The Lunar was shining a strong light that night, covering the fortress with the silk of silver.

"Ships in the harbor!" a roar called out.

Then another passed the warning through to the bell towers.

Bells sounded to inform the commanders and the king.

But Aldren was the first to see them approaching. He had been expecting them.

A captain opened the doors to the king's chamber to let him know of the news.

He found Aldren and Garran staring out the window.

"Sir?" the captain said. "There are three ships in the harbor."

"Three?!" Lord Garran asked, confused. "We only saw two."

"There is one following them, my lord," the captain said. "It carries an imperial banner."

"These are not military ships," Lord Garran said to the captain. "Identify their banners."

"Right away, sir," said the captain, closing the door.

"Purple, yellow, and light grey," Aldren whispered.

"What?" Lord Garran asked.

"The one on the right bears Artamur's crown, the one on the left is Varuktesh's, and the one behind bears Zarim's crown crest," Aldren responded.

A wind swept the light from the room when he finished speaking.

A vulture called in the dead of the night.

"Listen," Lord Garran said. "This is a sign from the gods."

"A sign of what?!" Aldren laughed. "We live on a mountain."

"I don't want to bury you like I did your father!" Lord Garran shouted. His voice echoed in the darkness of the room.

"This is war." Aldren put his hand on his shoulder. "One day or another, you may have to."

"Come back here!" Lord Garran shouted while Aldren walked out of the room.

The hallways were bright, the soldiers were ready with their torches, and the meeting room was already set with food and wine.

"Open the gates!" a harsh voice called.

The gates creaked open, inviting the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Right this way, my lords," a soldier said, pointing toward the meeting room.

Aldren was waiting in the opening of the door, not inside the room.

"Get inside, you fool," Lord Garran whispered harshly. "Don't mock the traditions here!"

"I am respecting my guests," Aldren said, lowering his head toward Garran's ear. "Perhaps the traditions that ignore the guests are obsolete."

Garran tried to pull his hand, but the guests had already arrived and could see him at the door.

"There he is!" an older voice said. "Aldren of House Varesh."

Once the torchlight revealed the face of the man who had arrived first, no secrets remained.

Maelor Kalthaer was the first guest to arrive, although his ship was the last.

He looked no different from an old man, even though he had no drastic age gap with Aldren.

Aldren had always thought he was much older than him. He respected him as he would a man his father's age.

He did not know that Maelor was almost the same age as he was.

Illness had taken so much from the man who had sacrificed his health for the crown.

But every action has its consequences, and every leap has its fall.

"Welcome, King Kalthaer," Aldren said, gently shaking his hand. "The room is set for you and your councilors."

"I came alone," Maelor replied with a faint smile.

Up close, his eyes told the story of a younger man, but his hair was whiter than snow, and his face was full of wrinkles.

As soon as the old man of Zarim's Tree walked inside the meeting room of Orinthal's fortress,

a series of footsteps echoed through the corridors.

A crowd walked toward them, speaking with each other along the way.

But their voices were more vivid than their words.

Ravik Korvael and his council walked toward the room first. They were so crowded together that they almost occupied the corridors.

So Aldren commanded the troops to make way for the guests.

There were all sorts of gift chests flowing toward the room, carried by women with brown hair who showed no more than their eyes and arms.

Their skin was as white as the clouds, before the curse, of course.

"Focus!" Lord Garran tapped his arm with his elbow. "You are not a child anymore."

Aldren laughed, facing the ground. Then he lifted his head to greet the guests.

"Welcome, my friends," Aldren said in a clear voice. "Please approach."

Ravik approached with a pale face, but this time, he wore a smile.

"Greetings," he said. "I have brought gifts to show my appreciation for your kindness today."

"Please," Aldren replied. "No need for gifts when I have your footsteps in my household."

"Kind of you to see us as your gifts, my friend," he responded. "But it would have been ignorant to walk into your territory empty-handed."

"Fair enough," Aldren said. "Please take your seats inside. I will join you shortly."

"As you wish," Ravik smiled.

As soon as the young king walked inside, a shaking, weak voice greeted him.

"Ravik, my boy!" Maelor said, sitting in the dark corner of the room. "How have you been?!"

"King Kalthaer?!" Ravik shouted. "How dare you show your face here?"

The altercation disturbed the calm environment of the fortress.

Lord Garran rushed inside to manage the event.

Aldren pretended everything was fine and kept the uncomfortable smile at the door as new footsteps sounded in the corridors.

"I trust we haven't met in a proper way, young man," a wise voice called clearly enough to turn Aldren's head. "I am Odran of House Eramushar."

A rough hand was extended. Aldren grabbed it before looking up.

Once he did, he found an older man, but not more than a decade older than him.

Odran Eramushar was a more experienced king, but not the bravest of kings.

Ravik had never gotten the chance to lead his troops, while Odran had chosen not to lead his. He had been crowned long before Aldren, and yet his campaigns were few.

But many simply accepted his warrior-like outfits and counted him as a commander of the battlefield.

But this was too recent to be recorded in any book, so Aldren thought he was facing a warrior king as well, feeling joy at having such a worthy ally on his side.

Inside, a battle of words was already at hand as their feet carried them into the room.

"Why are you here?" Ravik shouted. "You already allied with Varkan Marukhal."

"You are too young to wear a crown, son!" Maelor coughed. "I said I would not harm their ships if they were to pass near my territory."

"He speaks the truth," King Odran whispered close to Aldren's ear, tapping him on the shoulder.

"Let's all calm down and have a seat," Aldren said, raising his hands.

"I don't trust this man!" Ravik said, pulling a chair. "It would be wise not to."

"Listen, kid," Maelor coughed again. "I apologized to your father for the bitter misunderstanding of the first hour."

"Misunderstanding?" Ravik said. "You attacked our soil, accusing us of the cursed clouds!"

"Belsharuk's foolish act cost me my most worthy allies too, son!" Maelor raised his voice. "I sent for evidence that day and received my men's heads!"

He slowed down to catch his breath, putting his hand on his chest.

"What would you have done?" he continued after a moment.

"Fine!" Ravik rubbed his head. "We are here for a far more important matter."

"Yes," Odran said. "We are here to protect ourselves against this crisis by joining forces."

"Is that right?" Maelor laughed.

"Anything wrong?" Aldren asked the old king of Zarim.

"His realm has been attacked by Urkashur three times," Maelor kept the mocking tone. "And he was not present on the battlefield in any of those conflicts!"

"I needed to process the more civil matters at the time, sir!" Odran raised his voice.

"Is that how you justify hiding in your chamber like a whore?!" Maelor shouted. "Your cloak and your damaged armor don't fool me."

"Gentlemen!" Aldren requested a peaceful conversation.

The room fell silent to listen to the host.

"We all share the same concerns here," he said in a calm voice. "There is no point in arguing over the past."

"Indeed," Ravik stood up. "If we set aside our differences and discuss terms, we can survive this war."

"I agree with the boy!" Maelor said, tapping his shoulder.

"Very well, then," Odran spoke, clapping his hands. "Let's discuss."

"Let's start with the two problems we currently face," Maelor said, catching his breath.

"Which is?" Aldren asked, biting an apple.

"The two aggressive nations that cause trouble for all of us," Maelor responded.

"Ah, yes," Odran said. "Urkashur pushes on the left, and Nivarash pushes on the right."

"They intend to invade our lands, it seems," Ravik murmured.

"So it seems, young one," Maelor punched his own chest, forcing himself to cough. "The harlot queen in the east has brought me so much trouble lately."

"Queen Varkel is aggressive indeed," Lord Garran agreed. "She never sends for peace."

"And I've heard that her Avalanche earned their names," Ravik nodded.

A knock on the door broke the silence at once. They were not expecting anyone else to join.

"King Jaffarion the Wise!" a voice called into the room.

The members of the group were shocked to see the wise king of Tahl join them.

"Good evening," the old king said with a voice that showed signs of health despite the white hair. "They called me Tavian Jaffarion at birth."

"It's a pleasure to have you, wise one," Aldren said, standing up. "I am Aldren Varesh, your host for the night."

"Ravik Korvael, your honor," the young king of Varuktesh said, grabbing his hand.

"A firm grip, young man," King Jaffarion laughed.

"Odran Eramushar of Artamur," said the king of Artamur, his eyes fixed on the ground.

"Look up, young man," Jaffarion said, touching his shoulder. "I am not that old."

"And you know who I am," Maelor coughed.

"Of course, Maelor," the old man smiled. "I remember you as a child."

"I thought you were the same age!" Ravik said unconsciously.

The room fell silent again.

"Oh, no, my child," Jaffarion laughed to remove the tension. "He is merely a young man with horrible choices!"

"Alright, then," Aldren called. "Let's have a seat and chat."

"Please," Jaffarion said, sitting down and showing the others to join him.

Perhaps the only tradition kept sacred by Aldren was the respect for the elderly.

Tradition dictated that no one take their seat while an elderly member of the room was still standing, so he sat down last.

"As I was saying," Maelor continued, "Nivarash is to be neutralized if we are to experience peace."

"Indeed," Ravik agreed.

"It seems so with Urkashur and the mad king Marukhal as well," Odran said, shaking his head.

"So you wish to achieve peace by an act of war?" Jaffarion asked calmly.

"It is necessary to burn the rest of the forest at times to prevent the fire from spreading," Maelor said with a sharp tone.

"Fair enough," Jaffarion responded. "But it is a noble act to leave room for peace."

"With all due respect, sir," Ravik said nervously, "there is nothing noble about this war, nor Nivarash's aggressive stance."

"Grant me permission to send my advisors for peace at first light, will you?" Jaffarion tapped Aldren's arm.

"I can never turn down a noble act, my lord," Aldren responded.

"I have a proposal as well," Maelor said.

"Yes, sir?" Aldren responded.

"I will block the sailing path to Nivarash as soon as the negotiations fail," Maelor said. "If they send reinforcements, we will be buried in the snow."

"What makes you think the wise king's advisors will fail?" Odran asked.

"I know her better than most," Maelor responded. "She enjoyed the company of a real man back in the day."

"What an unthoughtful response, Maelor!" Jaffarion shouted. "Your father would have been ashamed of you if he drew breath today."

King Kalthaer fell silent and held his head down.

"We will hold the march for a fortnight, my lord," Aldren said to Jaffarion. "Meanwhile,

you can work for peace, and we can gather our troops here."

"Why in Orinthal?" Odran asked. "We need men back in Artamur."

"Orinthal is closest to Nivarash," Aldren said, pointing at the map. "And we have the high-ground advantage."

"He has a point," Ravik said. "I will send troops at first light."

"I will send ships for their transport," Maelor responded. "They will look less lively if they travel on foot."

"We have caravans," Ravik said. "They won't be delayed on the roads."

"I can use your ships to block Marukhal's troops here," Odran pointed at the map. "If we manage to block them in, they will not proceed further."

"Exactly," Ravik said. "Your ships are more needed there."

"Only if you join the fight!" Maelor laughed.

"Stop it, Maelor!" Jaffarion called harshly.

Maelor did not respond.

"Well then, gentlemen," Aldren said, "it is settled."

"So it seems," Jaffarion responded. "I will be on my way home then."

"As shall I," Maelor responded.

"You shall be Orinthal's guests tonight, my lords," Aldren said, pointing to Garran. "It is our tradition."

"Very well, then," Ravik agreed. "The sea is dangerous for sailing at night as well."

Once they gathered their papers and prepared to retreat to the rooms dedicated to them, Garran grabbed Aldren's hand.

"What tradition?" he frowned.

"We need to analyze our new allies more carefully," he whispered. "Keep a close eye on them all. We need details. Our lives depend on it."

Lord Garran's eyes widened while he nodded.

Ravik tapped Aldren's shoulder on the way out to get his attention.

"I saw how you looked at them," he said with a devilish smile.

"Yes," Aldren said. "They were beautiful, and I have a man's nature."

"I can spare one for the night," Ravik said. "She will join you when the lights are out."

"One for him too, please," Aldren pointed at Garran. "He has been stressed lately."

"Fine, fine," Ravik said. "Two is all I can give."

They went to the king's chamber once the captains escorted the other kings to the guest

chambers, with glorious furnishings prepared for their needs.

The rooms were decorated with golden furniture, silver lights, and ornate beds.

A magnificent room to spend the night in for most.

As soon as their ears could no longer hear other footsteps, Lord Garran grabbed Aldren's wrist.

"How are we going to focus on our tasks if women steal our attention?!" he whispered harshly.

"Relax," Aldren said, looking out the window. "We can do both."

The Lunar shied away from the king of alliances, but its children watched closely, absorbing what he had in mind for the following day to come...

Chapter Four

The Pale disk was already high above Orinthal when Aldren finally opened his eyes.

For a moment, he did not know where he was.

The ceiling above him was unfamiliar, the sheets felt softer than those in his own chamber, and the scent beside him was not one he recognized.

Then he remembered, he did not last long enough to go to his chamber.

He spent the night in another one of the guest rooms.

A woman's laughter escaped from the other side of the room.

Aldren turned his head slowly.

She was standing near the window, wrapped in one of the sheets, watching the mountains of Orinthal disappear beneath the morning light.

Her brown hair fell over her shoulders, and the expression on her face suggested that she had been waiting for him to wake.

"You are awake," she giggled.

"What time is it?" Aldren rubbed his eyes.

"Late." She laughed.

He sat up quickly.

"How late?" He asked.

"Late enough that your old friend has probably cursed your name three times." She replied.

Aldren stared at her.

"Where is lord Garran?" He asked confused.

He looked toward the window.

The sun was no longer pale.

It had already conquered the sky.

"God." The girl pointed to it.

Aldren threw the blanket aside and reached for his clothes.

He found his shirt first, then one boot.

The rest of his clothes were nowhere to be found.

He looked beneath the bed.

"Where is my other boot?" He asked.

"What?" The girl covered her mouth with her hand.

She pointed toward the opposite corner and laughed after a moment.

It was lying beside the chair.

Aldren walked toward it, still trying to fasten the belt around his waist.

"You could at least pretend not to laugh." He said with a smile.

"Maybe so." She laughed harder.

Aldren looked at her with an exhausted expression.

"Ravik sent you here to distract me."

He whispered almost to himself.

"He didn't send me." She said.

"What do you mean?" Aldren asked confused.

She did not say a word, she simply turned away facing the window again.

"I have a meeting to attend to."

"You had a meeting last night too." She said.

Aldren stopped for a moment to gather his toughts.

She smiled playfully.

He tried not to smile back.

"This is not helping." He said.

"You are the king of this palace." She dragged her hand across the wall.

"I am well aware." He frowned.

"Then tell your guests to wait for you." She turned back locking her eyes in Aldren's.

"I am not cruel enough to insult my guests." He said.

She tilted her head in response.

Aldren finally found his boot and pulled it over his foot.

He stood and tried to put on his cloak.

The fabric caught on the chair behind him.

He pulled harder.

The chair moved with it.

The girl burst into laughter.

Aldren shook his head and turned away.

He finally freed the cloak and placed it around his shoulders.

Then he looked toward the door.

The hallway outside was silent.

Far too silent.

He opened the door.

Lord Garran stood on the other side.

His arms were folded.

His expression was worse than the expression of every general in the war.

Aldren froze.

Garran looked at him.

Then he looked past him.

Then back at Aldren.

"Good morning sir." He said

"Good morning." Aldren replied.

"Did you sleep well?" Garran frowned.

Aldren hesitated.

"Very well." He replied after a moment.

"I am glad." Garran stepped aside, "Because everyone else has been awake for hours."

Aldren walked into the hallway.

The girl leaned against the doorway behind him.

"Good morning, Lord Garran." She laughed.

Garran looked at her, his eyes widened for a moment but he did not show he panicked.

He turned his gaze toward Aldren, then at the girl again.

"Good morning my lady." He said rubbing his eyes.

She replied with an open smile.

Garran turned and began walking, dragging Aldren with him.

"My lady?!" Aldren asked shocked.

"We have more important matters at hand," Lord Garran said disappointed, "Walk!"

"What happened?" Aldren asked.

"King Jaffarion has already prepared to leave." Garran said.

"Already?" Aldren asked shocked.

"He wanted to sail at first light," Garran frowned, "And you did not grant him farewell."

"And the others?" Took a step ahead.

"They are waiting in the map room." Garran tried to catch up.

"What did you mean by calling a maid my lady." Aldren asked his head down.

"Keep walking." Garran said without looking at him.

They continued down the hallway.

The fortress was already alive.

Soldiers moved through the corridors carrying papers, weapons, and wooden crates.

Messengers hurried past them.

Servants carried food toward the meeting room.

The sound of boots echoed from every direction.

"How many troops joined our cause?" Aldren asked.

"Thousands of men are at the harbor your majesty," Garran said, "And there are tens of other ships in coming with supplies and men."

"Anyone joined from the people?" Aldren asked walking toward the meeting room.

"I sent word," Garran replied, "We shall see the numbers soon enough."

"Shall we?" Aldren put his hand on the door.

Lord Garran showed the palm of his hand in agreement.

But before they got to open the door, the door opened.

Ravik stood on the other side.

"Where were you?" He frowned, "Come in, come in."

The wooden table of the room was set with wine, fruit and maps.

The room was more crowded than it has ever been.

King Kalthaer brough a crowd of advisors, king Odran was analyzing the map with a handful of decorated uniforms and king Jaffarion sent a council to advisors to represent him at the table.

"Your maid kept me busy all night." Aldren smiled whispering in Ravik's ear.

"My maid?!" Ravik replied with a sharp whisper, "I didn't send anyone to your room."

"What?" Aldren's eyes widened.

"Come on you two," Lord Garran grabbed their wrists, "We have more important tasks for now."

At the table, no one could hear one another.

"We shall set a stand here and here." A general pointed at the map close to king Odran.

"That is absurd sir," Another shouted, "You shall set our men to their doom if so."

"But what if we set the artillery here and the men shall stand behind the barricades." Another general joined the conversation.

The two nodded in agreement.

"Councilor," King Kalthaer called from the far end of the room, "What is our economic status so far?"

"Our ships have arrived at Orinthal's docks firs light like you asked my king." He replied,

"They brought enough resources to fund a total war for years."

"Order, gentlemen." Aldren shouted.

The room silenced for a moment.

"Where have you been all this time son," King Kalthaer laughed, "Come, we have work to do."

Ravik and Aldren approached the table to join the talks.

"I ordered thousands of horses to be boarded on ships that Maelor provided," King Odran

Eramushar put his hand on Aldren's shoulder, "They will be here shortly."

"Cavalry will be no good on Nivarash my lord," Aldren replied, "Look." He pointed on the map.

"How so?" Ravik asked looking closed at what Aldern's finger pointed to on the map.

"The mountains will exhaust horses," Aldren replied looking at the map, "with all that supplies and a rider, we are guaranteed to lose countless horses until we reach here." He pointed on the map.

"We have the finest spears and carriages in the eleven realms," A councilor called from Tahl's corner. "We can have them delivered to you in Artamur and you can assemble the cavalry there."

"Yes," King Kalthaer said rubbing his chin, "Urkashur is a savannah, the cavalry will give you a fair defense." He pointed at king Odran.

"Fair enough," He replied, "I have enough men to host thousands of cavalry men."

"And the spears will insure victory if they were to attack first." King Jaffarion's advisor said.

"We need swords men to accompany me to Nivarash," Aldren said, "Thousands, maybe more."

"I have enough trained men," Rivak replied, "I will accompany you."

"Good man." He tapped his shoulder.

"Did we agree on aggressive gesture toward the east?" King Kalthaer asked.

"If king Jaffarion's negotiators fail to reach terms," Rivak said, "It is better to put Nivarash on defense and Urkashur on offense."

"Good point." King Odran called raising his glass of wine, "We have enough experience to hold Urkashur back till the reinforcements arrive to finish them."

"We shall accompany your troops as soon as Nivarash retreats to their fortress." Rivak called pulling Aldren close.

"It will be unwise to leave a retreated army to regenerate." Aldren snapped.

"Wise kid." King Kalthaer said.

"Once we set camps here and here," Aldren pointed on the map, "You are granted safe

passage back to Artamur to attack the remaining Urkashur army while i negotiate surrender with the queen." He tapped Ravik's shoulder.

"The men will have no fight left in them if they travel that far." He replied.

"The ships are here for a reason my boy," King Kalthaer coughed, "The men will rest aboard."

"Yes," Aldren looked at Ravik, "As i wanted to add."

"Is that so?" Kalthaer smiled at him.

"All this of course if the queen is fool enough to reject Tahl's terms." An advisor called from the end of the room.

"Yes," Odran said, "Our priority is peace, even if we get a fraction of it."

"Of course it is," Kalthaer laughed coughing.

"What does that supposed to mean?" Odran asked.

"It means i want you on the first line with me on the defensive walls." Kalthaer said with a mocking tone.

"I will join my men in the fight." Odran said.

"You will stand shoulder to shoulder with me on the first line." Kalthaer frowned.

"We have plenty of time to discuss this when its time." Ravik said.

"Yes," Aldren agreed, "No need to argue on details now."

"Fine!" Kalthaer turned his head, "It is settled then."

"Yes," Odran said, "I shall return to Artamur to prepare the troops."

"I shall leave to Zarim to re organize the ships." Kalthaer said ordering his men to leave the room.

"I will prepare the siege mechanics and tactics while you plan the rest," Aldren said, "We need a plan of approach if fate desires so."

"Indeed," Ravik said, "I shall stay here to analyze the tactics with you."

"You are needed back in Varuktesh my friend," Aldren said, "I will send the maps as soon as me and my generals reach a verdict."

"Very well then," Ravik said, "After you gentlemen." He pointed to the others.

Ravik, lord Garran and Aldren stood in the far end of the room as the others left.

Their footsteps followed when the room was stripped of the crowd.

"So what about this maid you sent me?" Aldren asked Ravik, "Can she stay here with me?"

"I already told you Aldren," Ravik looked at him, "I never sent a maid, i forgot."

"Hello brother," The girl said with a smile, "Is it time to leave already?"

Aldren's eyes widened of shock, it was the same girl he spent the night with.

"Oh yes," Ravik said, "This is my younger sister Reysha Korvael."

"Pleased to meet you my king," She bowed.

"But..." Aldren tried to speak.

Lord Garran elbowed his arm.

"The pleasure is all mine my lady." He replied looking at Garran.

"We will sail to Varuktesh then," Ravik said, "I will send for the verdict."

"Yes, yes." Aldren said gazing at the girl.

She giggled in a naughty way.

"You knew?" Aldren whispered to Garran harshly.

"How is this my fault?" Garran frowned, "You fell for her trap."

Reysha turned back gazing at her achievement once again once she boarded the ship.

Every one boarded their ships to their own realms, Aldren Garran and their generals waved them farewell from the harbor.

Aldren was not this happy of sharing his bed with anyone, she challenged him to question his own thoughts, and that was enough for him.

Their eyes were locked as the ship sailed, then it was just the yellow dress on the pelvis staring back and then the figure faded in a mirage...

Chapter Five

The Pale disk drifted lazily on the horizon.

It shifted from side to side, forcing it self to shine awake as always.

But something caught its eye, something out of the ordinary.

The path that led to the mountains from Nivarash was abandoned for so long of a time since the armies first clashed shields and swords years ago when the war first began.

The path was bumpy and the plants found their way out of the soil since there were no rims or boots to bother their lives anymore.

The plants grew strong bonds, they joined hands at some points, making sure the boots and the rims never make their way passed their resistance.

But there was hood on a horseback that day.

The boy rode through the plants like the strings and the ropes the trees tied together were nothing to him compared to what task he carried.

The light granted a color of light green to his hood, and the wind passed through it since it was full on holes and rips.

Once the boy's eyes were granted the permission to visualize the fortress of Orinthal, the Pale disk was already wide awake, shining a blinding white.

The night was long gone, losing the battle to the light.

But the boy carried the exhaustion of the night still.

His eyes were shallow, with blackish bags under them.

His lips were dried of the windy path.

But his task seemed important enough to ignore his weaknesses to push forward.

"Contact!" A soldier called from the tower ringing the bells.

The shield wall was formed in a matter of seconds.

Shields tied together behind the wall, spears facing forward.

The guards were ready to face anything to prevent harm to what remained in the walls.

"State your business!" Another soldier called pointing an arrow toward him.

"I have word for king Aldren," The boy caught his breath, "It is urgent!"

"From whom?" The soldier pulled the string.

"King Jaffarion the wise!" The boy shouted up.

"Open the gates!" The soldier called down.

The wooden gates cracked open as soon as the command traveled.

"Halt!" Another came forward, "Show me your badge."

The boy pulled a golden handful of a coin out of his cloak, it showed a sign.

The sign belonged to Tahl's fortress.

"Proceed," The soldier pointed toward the stared, "Stand down."

The shield wall opened a mouth for the boy to pass through but the spears were still pointed toward his thorax.

Yet the boy showed no fear, only exhaustion was in his eyes.

Maybe what he saw before him was a familiar scene, an ordinary part of his job.

"War changes a human nature, doesn't it?" Lord Garran murmured almost to himself approaching the young man.

"My lord!" The boy unmounted his horse.

The letter case shone silver under the bright light of the disk.

He extended it toward Garran.

"Patience son," He replied raising his hand, "Follow me."

The boy followed lord Garran up the stair case.

The fortress of Orinthal was made of brownish bricks carved from the heart of the mountains.

Some looked orange up close, some yellow, and some a darker brown.

But the colors merged into a beautiful harmony of brown, bright enough to ignore its holes and dents that the war caused.

"Come in." Aldren called once Garran knocked on the door.

Inside the king's chamber, a wide table awaited them, wooden with no intension of showing a sign of wealth.

But durable enough to hold its purpose.

Ravik was already inside, they sailed first light to plan the preparations.

The ships brought more spears, shields, swords and armors.

Women of Orinthal sewed banners of dark blue with a lion mark of gold shining on it.

Every house had one on its roof, showing their resistance.

Men joined arms with the army, every house spared a set of boots to the fortress.

By the time the call for recruits spread, young men were already at the gates of the fortress.

Today was a the third day of preparation, three days passed since the day of the planning.

King Maelor Kalthaer sent ships across the sea to support the men with fine crafted supplies of Zarim, and the privilege of transportation through water.

The men were well motivated and well rested by the time the decks smashed against the harbors.

The women joined to claim medical training, prepare food for the troops and sew new uniforms and banners for the men.

No banner stood a chance alone, all carried the banner of the United Lions.

"Your majesty," The boy spoke, "Word from the advisors."

Aldren approached to greed the young man.

"Have a seat young one," Aldren said, "Drink some water."

The boy's hands shook, Aldren noticed.

Perhaps of a travel that tired armies, or perhaps of shame or worse.

"The advisors brought word today," The letter wrote, "Nivarash chose war."

"Our terms were generous!" Aldren smashed his fist on the table.

"Perhaps the time has come for the curse to be put to a test." Ravik murmured.

"What blessing better than a curse that united five banners?" Aldren raised his head.

"Then it is settled," Garran spoke, "If the elites advisors of Tahl failed to reach peace, the peace was never an option."

"So it seems," Aldren said, "Send word, I will join you."

Lord Garran nodded guiding the boy out walking beside him.

The walk down the stares was a calm and silent one, none of them spoke.

"Safe travels." Lord Garran smiled.

"Thank you my lord." The boy wore his hood.

Outside, the men were training and the banners were set on solid ground.

"Men!" Aldren shouted from the stairs as soon as his boots reached the ground.

He was in his armor, a damaged metal plated armor of leather.

On it, the mark of a Grey Falcon showed, no room for the lion remained.

He carried the mark of the united lions in his hands, a banner danced in his hands in the wind.

The men replied with a roar that shook the mountains.

Only a handful of them were experienced in war, most were trained recently.

Elites of Zarim trained the men to fight with skill.

They relied heavily on their brothers in arms, Varuktesh supported the cause with the largest army that Orinthal ever hosted.

The men were motivated to defend the lion banner once the boots shook their ceilings.

"The queen of Nivarash chose war today."

Aldren shouted into the armored men.

The armors sent from Zarim were modified for light travel while offering maximum protection, Zarim made a hefty profit for selling them to Orinthal as it did selling their advanced ships to the other members of the alliance.

"Are we going to let the harlot queen spit on our banners?" Rivak shouted raising a fist.

"No!" The men roared simultaneously.

"Then we move to face Nivarash before they get the chance to march forward!" Aldren shouted.

The lion banners caught the light in every row, the men raised their spears, then struck them three times on the ground.

The gates opened on command, Aldren and Ravik were the first two to carry the lion banner outside.

Thousands of helms and armors flooded out the gates a few steps ahead.

Lord Garran was the only one with a horse, he marched between the lines to keep the harmony.

Everyone else was on foot behind the two kings.

It was early still, morning light was still young.

But the cold squeezed through some of the armors, even though it was far away.

The boots followed the kings to the path leading to the mountain trail.

The path was full of life, birds sang songs to greet the boots, the reptiles hid in their layers

as they saw darker creatures marching through.

The ground had a slope to it, some of the men slipped and fell.

Others gathered their fellow with a laugh, every row shared the laughter of the ones who got humbled by nature.

Banners tilted, some fell to the ground to be gathered again.

A few steps ahead, almost none of the lion banners were clean, mud consumed the lions.

"This curse will best us i assume." Lord Garran whispered shaking his head.

The march led the boots to a sparse snow on the ground, indicating that the spears were about to be set to use soon enough.

Hands shook, holding the banners.

Up the hills, Nivarash's fortress showed, It was nothing like The Boulder of Orinthal.

The Iceberg of Nivarash was a sign of years of construction, shining white under the light like pure water.

It was a magnificent figure of a harmony of marbles that took generations to put together.

"Look," Rivak pointed, "We are close."

"Yes," Aldren said signing to Garran.

"Shields!" He called to the army.

A tide of shields covered the men's heads, all in white.

"Part of your plan?" Rivak asked smiling.

"This will prevent the Iceberg watch to notice our approach." He said.

The march continued to a small village.

It seemed abandoned, then a cavalry of four approached.

"Hold!" Aldren called as soon as the men pulled their horse's leash.

The man in front spoke but none of the words were familiar to Aldren, the language was unknown to him, even though he thought he knew every language in eleven realms.

Lord Garran approached smashing his fist to his chest, talking to them in that unknown language.

Aldren and Rivak looked at each other, then at the participants.

The men on horseback pointed to a path behind them, Garran nodded.

The path was wider than the five others ahead of them.

"He say this is the main route to the Iceberg," Garran called, "We are to pass safely if we don't harm their people."

"He said that?" Rivak asked shocked.

"Yes." Lord Garran responded.

"What kind of people let a foreign army march toward their keep?" Rivak's eyes widened.

"The kind that are tired of a leader who drains their resources to feed her own greed." Lord Garran said, "You have much to learn still."

Aldren smiled with his head down.

The helmet covered his face enough to grant him the right to surrender to his feelings today.

A helmet of golden color, with a mane of light brown on top.

His shoulders were covered with alight brown fur as well, they knew the path would be cold, and their bodies were accustom to warmth of the closest realm to the Pale disk.

Rivak had a similar armor, only his had a black and white fur.

Lord Garran was dressed in a full white cloak and a full black armor underneath.

He wore no helm, his white hair hosted the fresh snow that the the skies of Nivarash always hosted.

"Travel a few steps ahead, not farther than my vision," Aldren whispered to him asking him to lower his head, "I don't trust these people."

"Understood," He replied, "There might be an ambush ahead."

"Hiah!" He kicked the horse.

The army approached behind the white cloaked minister of Orinthal.

The path seemed clear, no ambush was ahead as long as their eyes were set on the Iceberg.

"Hold!" Aldren called midway waiting for Garran to exit the other end of the valley.

"If there is an ambush," Rivak said, "He will not make it through."

"Age hasn't dulled his senses yet," Aldren whispered, "He is still the best swordsman of the Boulder."

The white horse turned far away turned away facing the army after a moment, a sound of a whistle conquered the air between the two hills of the valley.

"March!" Aldren shouted.

The men roared, boots shook the ground.

The last row rolled the artillery, cannons, catapults and carriages joined.

on the other side, the Iceberg showed off its glory.

Marble shone white under the snow, the Pale disk had so little part in the light it reflected.

On the gates below, there was a company of three horses, the one up front was the queen.

The two behind were the royal guards, dressed in grey suits of armor, with white helms and white wolf furs on their shoulders.

The queen wore the same, lacking the helm.

She was an older woman, almost old enough to Aldren's grandmother.

Her white hair glowed under the snow, her hair was braided in an old tradition.

The wrinkles of her face showed signs of a mighty mother that defended her child no matter what the cost.

But she knew so little which child she had to prioritize, the Iceberg or the living.

Once the army marched forward, filling the background of Orinthal's cavalry of a solo

man with an experience of generations, the other side waved a banner of white.

It was not the Ice blue Eagle banner, it was a sign to talk.

"I will go," Lord Garran spoke, "I will bring back word."

Aldren nodded, trusting the old man's words.

The path transformed into a lake of ice a hustle forward, the horse began to slip.

But lord Garran was no inexperienced rider, he never fell down his horse.

"Impressive Garran," The queen said, "Just like when you were a young man."

"So it seems my lady," He replied politely, "Why the negotiation banner now?"

"Our reinforcements are on their way through Zarim," She spoke," I ask that you wait until our ally joins as yours did."

"From Zarim?" Lord Garran's eyes widened

"Yes," The queen replied, "King Kalthaer is a trusted asset of the Iceberg as always."

"I shall bring the word back," Garran turned his horse, "I will come back with the verdict."

The horse sounded a sharp neigh as it vanished in the snow in an instant toward the friendlies.

Aldren was the out of the shield wall, Rivak was among the men speaking to them, motivating them.

When the horse stopped, a scream pushed it a step forward.

"Do as i command!" The scream translated to.

Then after the horse fully stiffened, lord Garran crashed to the ground.

There was an arrow pinned to his back.

Aldren rushed to gather his most trusted friend, but he was already lifeless.

The arrow traveled far faster than the command.

Aldren's chin began to quiver, but he fought the tears back.

There was no point in holding a dead body, the friend inside was long gone.

"Cannons!" Aldren stood up.

Rivak turned away rushing forward, once he saw what had happened, he did lost his words.

The cannons rolled forward to the first line, the soldiers roared.

"Fire!" Aldren shouted once the cannons faced the walls.

The queen and her guards ran inside the walls as the balls of steal crashed through next to them.

The king of Orinthal held his sword up, but underneath all that steal he wore, a man cried in grief...

Chapter Six

The Pale disk watched as the cannons ripped civilization off of a fortress that stood tall long before any one on the surface today walked the globe.

"Fire!" Aldren's sword came down shaking.

Rivak did could not tell anger apart from grief once he saw Aldren's eyes.

"If we rush," Rivak turned him around holding his shoulders, "We will run out of resources."

"They will pay for their act of savagery," Aldren looked him in the eyes, "If they chose to be loyal to nature, they should learn to live in it."

"Who should we negotiate with if the Iceberg collapses to snow?" Rivak ask.

"The time for negotiation had passed." Aldren said looking at the Iceberg.

"Get a hold of yourself!" Rivak shouted, "This is madness!"

The Pale disk was wearing its orange robe, It was time for the Lunar to take over, letting it

take some rest from its never ending occupation.

Sometimes, no matter how long a task lasts, a refreshment will keep you from surrendering your will to madness.

And that goes for all aspects of life, no matter how wise, how strong or how ancient.

An army pored out the gates of the Iceberg.

"Avalanche!" Rivak shouted toward the men.

The men responded with a roar.

"Charge!" Aldren called.

The men followed him into the middle of the frozen lake, Rivak froze for a moment, questioning his choices.

"This is madness," He whispered to himself, "No army has survived a battle on the frozen lake."

For generation, this never ending riddle kept the Iceberg from all sorts of harm.

Fate was not sure when to mark one's death on a lake of ice, people never knew if the next step would be their last.

Even merchants hesitated to walk their mules to the Iceberg every now and then, even though the profit of selling goods to the Iceberg was so much more than selling to the villages around, only a handful dared to take the risk.

But today, two armies faced each other on the battlefield they both knew it was more powerful then both of them put together.

It was madness for an army to draw their weapons on nature itself, but today, was a day of madness indeed.

Rivak finally realized, if the army ahead failed to reach the gates of the Iceberg, it was certain doom for him and his men no doubt.

The freezing wind demanded the living to never stop moving, if they did, nature would mistake them for the dead.

"Charge!" Rivak shouted of the top of his lungs.

The men behind him followed him to the battlefield.

The army of the United Lions was far larger than the Avalanche ahead of them, but the

Avalanche was never much of a concern for them.

The walls of the Iceberg had never been breached before, and if an army failed, they would be doomed outside the gates in nightfall.

Once the Lunar took over, no living being must be outside for the wind to grab.

The evening was close, doom awaited them all.

The armies clashed shields under the orange light, the Avalanche never stood a chance.

It was as if their title belonged to the opposing army.

The Lion banner pushed through the Iceberg's most elite in a matter of seconds.

But it was too late, they were not quick enough to breach the walls.

"Nightfall!" Aldren turned to Rivak.

He found Rivak looking at the sky shocked.

The retreat order froze on his lips once he turned back.

A storm of arrows blocked the light of the day.

"Shields!" Aldren called to the army throwing himself to the ground.

An arrow landed on his foot, another on his shoulder.

His had his eyes on his younger ally as he took cover, Rivak stood shocked under the rain.

But he remained unharmed, not a single arrow struck the only man that was not hiding behind his shield.

He just looked at the sky and stood still.

"What in the eleven realms do you think you're doing?!" Aldren shouted running toward him.

He was limping, the arrow did not cause pain, but it landed on his thigh when he managed to look down.

The young man stared at him with widened eyes but he didn't say a word.

"Turtle formations!" Aldren called tackling Rivak to the ground.

The second wave of the storm had arrived.

The men blocked arrows on their shields, but the arrows were never the problem.

The Ice underneath their boots started to crack.

Freezing water swallowed a line of men, their shields were useless when it came to nature's might.

Another army formed in front of the gates of the Iceberg in a blink of an eye.

A hand slapped Aldren on the face.

"The Avalanche is not the men!" Rivak shouted, "Its the arrows!"

He was right, the Iceberg buried armies in the bottom of the very lake they stood on, and now it intended to do so with the Lion banner.

"The men approaching us are not trying to fight us," Aldren whispered to himself, "They intend to keep us on the lake."

"Stand up!" He called to Rivak.

The two managed to found solid ground for their feet.

Once they got a larger scale, the horror uncovered.

The men were being swallowed by the ice, some were no where to be found, only a crack remained on ice where they once stood.

Others were life less half way on the ice, it seemed the ice only needed half a lad to take their lives.

"March!" Aldren shouted, "Keep turtle formations!"

The men marched with their shields up, their shells kept them from the arrows above but not the death below their feet.

All they could do to escape death was to march toward the walls.

It was too late to go back, the night was too close.

Either they conquered the Iceberg, or it conquered them.

The ice consumed a man to the far right, then a one standing next to Aldren.

Rivak was shaking, but the inexperienced king was healthy and marching, his face looked pale.

A handful of steps forward Aldren felt a push to the shell.

The opposing army pushed to hold them back.

"Forward!" He shouted to the men, "Porkpie formations."

The men were too weak to respond, but too determined to admit death.

So the spear men came fowrad.

The speared pieced their own shell, then the opposing side's armors.

Their formation broke a few steps to the solid ground around the Iceberg, but they were too close to give up.

Aldren threw the spear and drew his sword, his shield was too damaged to keep as well.

So he lost the additional weight to walk faster.

A sword matched his own, the king flipped it and redirected his own to the man's chest plate.

But the armor kept him still, a flash cut a wound open on the king's face.

Then a spear hit the man in the throat from behind.

Once Aldren turned, a captain nodded.

Then an arrow landed in his chest, and he fell to the ground.

The field was stripped of civil people, all that remained were savages.

Swords found way to the hearts, spears to thoraxes, and arrows to the skulls.

A block passed over Aldren's head, a shadow that conquered his existance.

It went directly through the wall, a gap opened at last.

"Push!" He called.

The men were too busy to respond, everyone had the dance of their own with death.

"Move," Rivak tapped his shoulder, "Its now or never."

A handful of men followed, perhaps they were all that remained.

Inside, no one met their eyes.

The Iceberg was stripped of life, so they rushed to the walls.

An archer aimed for Rivak's back, Aldren ran to push him away, but a block carried the archer with it, along with the ground that he stood on.

So they dodged the remains of the wall above them and rushed to the stair case.

"Hold!" Rivak said looking across the corridor, "There might be traps."

"We don't have time to hesitate!" Aldren whispered harshly.

"Give me your shield," He responded, "The goal will not be a benefit to our corpses."

"I tosses mine." Aldren said.

"I don't have mine either." He responded.

"Take mine sir." A soldier said from the company that followed them.

"Mine as well." Another added his to the foundation.

"Thank you," Rivak smiled, "You're a good man."

Then he tossed one of the shields toward the door almost horizontally, the shield tapped on a door and fell to the ground.

"What was that supposed to be?" Aldren said harshly.

Rivak slid the other shield to the door ignoring him.

A series of arrows darkened the corridor, hitting each wall on their side.

But they were out of the room still, so none fell for what fate had manufactured for them today.

"See?" Rivak smiled to Aldren.

Aldren was too confused to respond, this could have been the death of him, if he had not been more patient.

"Lets move." Rivak tapped his shoulder.

"What makes you think there aren't any more traps?" He asked.

"This was designed as a final trick," Rivak said, "There are never two."

So they moved, Aldren a step behind Rivak.

Once they opened the door, they found a room of grace.

Walls of white, made of marble, tables of carved ice.

Statues of a rare type of wood they had never seen.

Snow came through the windows, and the curtains were wide open, dancing in the wind.

But all the members were lifeless on the ground, all of them except for the queen.

She sat on her throne with a cup in her hands, the cup was transparent.

No liquid inside, only ice.

Then after a moment when they locked eyes with Aldren and Rivak.

"You fool!" She murmured.

But before they could answer, she fell to the ground and started to shake.

"No use." Aldren stopped Rivak putting is hand on his chest.

"Poison?" Rivak asked.

Aldren nodded walking toward the window...

Chapter Seven

The light slipped through the darkness's grip.

It fought through the assets of the night to reach the people on the ground.

The people never understood the struggle that the army of the Pale Disk went through to reach them on the surface of the muddy globe.

But the battle's result was always predictable.

The army that the Pale Disk commanded won every time.

It has been like this for eternity, and the people have grown accustomed to this.

If the night and its assets were to conquer the world of the living, it would have been time to panic.

When times force people to adapt to something that they have never lived with, the people will struggle.

But people have survived by adapting to various events that were never familiar to them before.

And that unpredictable event now occupies most of their time.

Today was a day of change for Nivarash.

The Pale Disk was not accustomed to the realm of ice.

It barely visited this area.

But no one knew if the ice found the opportunity to conquer this land once it found out the light made sure no power could take over it, or whether it was the fact that the icy weather had been stronger than the light in these lands since the beginning of time.

This story was older than anyone who walked these lands nowadays, so no one was really sure.

The Pale Disk found its way at last.

The light dragged its hand on the harmony of marbles that granted reality to the Iceberg.

This fortress was once one of the greatest showcases of mankind's existence, but now it showed the signs of how cruel and arrogant they can be to achieve their goals.

There was white dust on the ground once the light looked down.

Bricks of marble were cracked and ripped off the walls.

Cannonballs nested in some of the holes they made, and fell off to wreck even more than they were intended to at some spots.

The windows were cracked, even though the cold outside was brutal in their absence.

Dead bodies covered the ground.

Some were torn apart by the wolves, and some were consumed by the ice.

No one knows which one is a blessing and which is a curse.

For their remains to burn in the stomachs of wild animals, or for nature to claim their remains.

The men were outside early that day.

Some were searching for the remains of their friends.

Some others were looking for still-functional weapons, and some others wandered around looking for something valuable on the dead bodies of the soldiers from the other side.

But as a force shook the ground under their feet for a moment, snow that rested on the

bricks fell to the ground, and the ice that formed the lake cracked even more.

The soldiers knew that when the frozen lake promised a soul to the other side, it delivered.

So they ran toward the Iceberg before even noticing a detail.

Aldren woke from a deep sleep once he heard the rush.

Rivak was already awake and on the walls of the Iceberg.

Aldren had fallen asleep with his full gear on. Even his sword was still on his belt.

So he ran as soon as he heard the boots rushing inside.

He ran up the stairs to the walls.

The cold was brutal, and the Pale Disk was too busy to care for such a small part of its daily routine.

Once his face got above the walls, he first noticed the cold, then his friend Rivak on the walls staring toward a far end of the mountains.

"What news?" Aldren asked.

"Come," he replied.

Once Aldren walked toward where Rivak stood, there was no longer a need for explanation.

An army of thousands approached the walls of the Iceberg.

"It seems we have to defend the very fortress we traveled to destroy today," Rivak said with his eyes locked on the army.

"This will be the end of us," Aldren said. "We do not have enough men left to defend the walls."

"I have an idea," Rivak said.

"Which is?" Aldren replied.

"Order your men to pick the torches from the walls and plant them sparsely all over the Iceberg, and I will order mine to do this as well," he said.

"What is the point of this?" Aldren asked. "We will freeze to death if we do this."

"We are two kings that wrecked a castle of another nation far away from our home," Rivak said. "Freezing to death is a much better end than being captured by whatever army approaches the gates."

Aldren was shocked by what he heard. Rivak was right. Allied armies were days away.

These were almost certainly natives of Nivarash.

So Aldren and Rivak separated to gather the torches with their men.

Every torch was placed at a certain point to cover more ground, and on every corner, some men waved their torches and the Lion banner.

There were hardly a hundred men remaining in total. They knew they didn't stand a chance.

But once they climbed back to the towers, they saw a hesitation in the advance of the approaching army.

The opposing army stopped at the frozen lake.

Their banners were not familiar to either of the kings.

"They stopped," Rivak said.

"Yes," Aldren said. "It is time to state terms."

"We don't stand a chance," Rivak said. "What are we going to negotiate?"

"They think we do," Aldren said. "Thanks to your scheme."

"It was an old tactic of my father's." He smiled.

"Then let's go make him proud," Aldren said, walking toward the stairs.

Rivak nodded and went with him.

The castle was falling apart, but the stairs were mostly solid.

Once their boots touched the ground, the army ahead looked like a smaller one.

Multiple lines had decreased to a single one.

So the two kings walked on the ice to reach the other side.

The banners were still unknown, a banner marked with a wolf and another with a bear.

They had never seen such banners before.

The horns sounded as they approached, but the opposing army was not aggressive.

A man stepped out of the army.

His armor was made of leather, and he wore a coat of grey fur around his shoulders.

Then another appeared, a taller man with a metal helm and armor that was made of some sort of wood.

"Greetings," Aldren said. "We came to talk."

"About what?" the taller man said with a deep voice.

"About granting you the right to rebuild your country," Aldren responded.

"You already wrecked the monument of years of civilization," he replied. "If you came to talk, there were other ways."

"If you wish to spill blood," Rivak said, "we will gladly do so."

"The United Lions armies are already on their way," Aldren continued.

"The United Lions?" the man with the leather armor said.

"Yes," Aldren replied.

"Their armies have led successful campaigns in multiple realms as we speak," he

whispered to the other man. "We can't fight an army that big."

"Yes," Rivak replied. "You barely have enough men to fight our army in the Iceberg." He pointed toward the torches.

"But we can make you suffer great losses," the taller man said, looking at Aldren.

"And this will be the end of you," Aldren replied, smiling.

"What are your terms?" the other man asked.

"You will betray me and our motherland?" the taller man shouted at him.

"The only way to save the motherland is to survive!" he shouted back at him.

"Very well then," Aldren said. "We will fund the rebuilding of the Iceberg if you pay tribute and spare men to the Lion banner."

"And?" the taller man asked.

"And the Lion banner should stand on the Iceberg henceforth," Aldren replied.

"You wish to take our heritage away from us?" the man in the leather armor asked.

"What banner was on that tower yesterday?" Rivak said.

"The ice-blue crown crest, of course," the man replied.

"Yes," Rivak said. "That is not your heritage, sir. That is an imperial banner you serve under."

"I suppose so," the man replied.

"This is your banner," Aldren continued. "Your heritage will not be harmed." He pointed at their banners behind them.

"Are there any other acts of disgrace you would like to add?" the taller man asked.

"We are allowing you to rebuild what your queen occupied for years with the resources of your people," Aldren said. "How is this a disgrace?"

"You are simply giving back what you stole from us," he replied.

"Our men fought with honor," Aldren shouted, "and they will fight yours with the same courage!"

Aldren turned away and started walking.

"What are you doing?" Rivak whispered in his ear.

"Wait!" the man in the leather armor called.

"Yes?" Aldren replied, smiling at Rivak.

"We agree on your terms on one condition," he said.

"Which is?" he replied.

"No soldier serving under your banner will be allowed to harm our civilians or own land in our country," he said.

"Agreed," Aldren replied.

"I have a condition of my own!" the taller man called.

"What?" Aldren said.

"If you can defeat me in battle," he said, "me and my men will agree to your terms."

"Me against you," Aldren said. "No one else is to be harmed."

"I wished to offer me and my guards against yours," he replied, "but your offer is more fun."

So the two walked on the frozen lake until they reached the middle.

Aldren drew his sword.

His opponent drew his.

The swords met and stayed connected for a moment, then they separated and clashed again.

Aldren's sword was a long-handled one. It was meant to be grabbed with one hand.

But the other man had a different kind of sword. Its edge was curved, and its handle was short.

Every time Aldren attacked, he blocked with a single hand, while Aldren delivered the blow with two hands on the hilt.

It was no use. There was no approach to the man, and Aldren was tired.

But at that moment, when he redirected his opponent's sword to the ground, he saw a detail.

The other man was taller than Aldren, therefore heavier.

Every movement the opponent made resulted in a crack in the ice under his feet.

But he was too proud of having the upper hand, and he ignored the facts that he had known since birth.

Aldren raised his sword overhead, then swung it low when his opponent tried to block, piercing the ice under the man's foot.

The ice cracked in a moment and swallowed the opponent.

The man almost froze to death in a matter of seconds, but Aldren rushed to grab his hand.

He was unconscious when Aldren pulled him out, but not dead.

Once the army and Rivak saw the battle's end, they rushed to see the verdict.

"Is he dead?" Rivak shouted.

"No!" Aldren replied.

"Gather him and bring him back," the man in the leather armor said.

Aldren helped bring the taller man to his men.

"You did not kill him," the man in the leather armor said, surprised. "Sparing a challenger's life is not our way."

"It is mine," Aldren said, catching his breath.

"My men will begin rebuilding the Iceberg at first light," he said. "I trust you will hold your end of the bargain."

"We will sell you the resources you need at the lowest price and fund the rebuilding process as I said," Aldren replied. "I am a man of my word."

"It is almost the afternoon," Rivak said. "We must go now if we want to find ourselves in Orinthal before the night."

"Agreed," Aldren said. "Go back to your home. We will start the work tomorrow."

"Very well then." The man turned away, signaling his men to return to their village.

The army vanished in the snow a few steps ahead, almost like they were never there.

The snow covered their footprints and swallowed them whole.

"We were lucky," Rivak said.

"We were talented," Aldren smiled.

The two walked laughing toward the Iceberg to gather their men to return home.

The men cheered their return...

Chapter Eight

The light covered Aldren's face as the Pale disk rose to give light to the living once again.

Aldren was asleep in his own chamber, not willing to wake up.

He grabbed the blanket of brown fur and pulled it to his face, but the blanket did not obey the king's will as all servants must.

A strange but familiar scent was around, a smooth and mild fragrance that dominated the room.

Aldren was furious of the defiance of his command, so he pulled the blanket harder.

This time the Pale disk forced his eyes open, he was tired but wanted to see what was bothering him in his own room.

Once the blanket's rule was over, a fragile set of shoulders appeared on the other side.

He moistened his lips unconsciously staring at the sight.

"Stop it!" A back of a hand slapped him in the face.

The voice was enough to wake him up entirely.

"It's her again!" The voice in his head called.

He did not know if he was angry of her presence or flattered.

All he knew was that the girl got what she wanted once again.

"And we don't even remember what happened last night!" The voice rang.

It was right, Aldren didn't recall how he made it to the castle last night.

He looked at the soft creature that laid beside him again, her dark brown hair glowed in the light of the morning.

Some strands glowed white, some yellow and some orange.

Aldren couldn't hold back, he dragged his fingers in the girl's hair hoping this would bring peace to his damaged mind after all that clash of swords and all that blood shed.

The girl turned around and placed herself between his arms.

Then she opened her eyes and fixed them in his.

"We were wrong," The voice in his head murmured, "Her eyes are green."

It was right again, the morning light showed the truth he did not see in the first night she sneaked in his room.

"Why are you here?" Aldren asked fondling her hair.

"Why are you?" She asked.

She challenged his every action, and his every word and he could not deny that he liked this rebellion between his arms.

The Pale disk shared a portion of its light with them.

The girl's skin shone olive under the light.

His eyes followed the light unwillingly, he could not resist.

"I asked you a question." She stared at his eyes.

"I am the king of this realm I'll have you know!" Aldren said.

"I already know that," She said dragging her nails on his body, "But I am your guest."

"What do you mean?" He asked.

"It means you should bring me something to eat." She said.

"How dare you?" He asked shocked, "I am no one's servant!"

"You will be mine!" She smiled.

Aldren could not find proper words to answer her, she seemed to always win in their arguments.

"You promised my brother to grant me a pleasant stay here as he attends to his tasks," She continued, "Now deliver."

"Where is Rivak anyway?" Aldren's eyes widened.

"You really don't remember a thing do you?" She pulled him close.

"No." He answered.

"You made it back at midnight," She said, "You were freezing, both of you."

"Nivarash is cold," He said, "Yes."

"I sailed here to inform my brother that your allies need him in Artamur." She smiled.

"Why just him?" He asked, "Why not me?"

"I needed you here so i didn't read the full letter king Kalthaer sent." She giggled.

"You did what?!" Aldren jumped from the bed.

She grabbed his hand and pulled him back in.

"Rivak is experienced enough to handle this and all the allies are there except you." She dragged her hand on his face.

"Exactly," He said, "All the allies are there but not me!"

"You swore an oath to Rivak last night!" She said as Aldren was getting on his feet to get ready.

"What oath?" He said wearing his boots.

"You said that you would protect me from those tribes you faced in Nivarash." She crawled closed to him.

"My soldier's will protect you." He said strapping his boots.

"What if they fail in the absence of your leadership?" She dragged her nails on his back, "What would you answer my brother?"

Aldren looked up and out the window in shock wondering.

"Yes, valid point." The voice in his head whispered.

"Yes but what if your brother fails to proceed in our campaign in my absence?" He said, "He is inexperienced in battle."

"I shall inform my brother that you think so low of him the next time we meet." She said turning away.

"Don't do that!" Aldren said.

"These are your words not mine." She said her back to Aldren.

"Alright fine!" Aldren said with a sharper tone, "You win, I'll stay here!"

"It is late for that now." She said sitting at the other corner of the bed.

"I said I will do what you want!" Aldren said.

"I wanted you to that a moment ago," She replied, "Now my demands differ."

"What is it you demand?" Aldren responded rubbing his eyes."

"Go get me something to eat and we will talk," She said, "I will be here when you come back."

"Guard!" Aldren called toward the door.

A soldier stepped inside in a blink of an eye.

"I did not say ask your guards to bring me food," She folded her arms, "I said go bring me something to eat."

"Fine!" Aldren stood up, "You come with me and help me find the food supplies." He pointed at the soldier.

Aldren grabbed his robe and wore it in a second, then he followed the soldier out the room.

The poor soldier was almost pushed out the king's chamber as Aldren walked outside furious.

"Where are the stocks?" Aldren asked him.

"Down the stairs your majesty to the right." He straightened.

"Garran used to do this!" He whispered to himself.

"Don't you want to admit you miss your most trusted asset?" The voice inside his head rang.

"That is what I'm doing!" Aldren said out loud walking down the stairs.

The two soldiers standing beside the door looked at each other in shock.

"They said whoever tends to conquer the Iceberg will fall into madness." The one on the right said.

"Shhhh," The other said, "Someone will hear us speaking."

The door cracked open and a set of eyes popped out, they analyzed the right soldier first, then after a moment the one on the left.

The soldiers stiffened, assuming there was something wrong.

"It's alright," She giggled, "I think he is a little crazy too."

The soldier on the right smiled, but the one on the left remained neutral.

"You are no fun," She said looking at them again, "I shall wait for the crazy man to return."

Then she closed the door and went inside.

The light dragged its hand on her face, a round face with soft smooth skin.

The wind fondled her hair glowing almost gold under the morning light.

Her eyes were green as grass, so beautiful that the Pale disk hid behind its curtains when she looked out the window.

She wore nothing but one of the blankets that nested on the bed.

Her shoulders glowed under the light, so thin and fragile that you could mistake her for a

creature that is not capable of harming another.

The door cracked open and she turned around covering her shoulders and her chest.

Aldren walked inside with a tray made of iron, decorated with all kinds of food.

She ran towards him like a younger girl, grabbing the tray and turning away.

"You did good." She said with her mouth full.

"I prepared it myself," He said, "Its an old recipe of my house hold."

"I have some of my own," She said still her mouth full, "I will prepare some thing for you tomorrow."

"You will sail for Varuktesh at noon." He frowned.

"And you will come with me." She smiled.

"I need to attend to Nivarash." Aldren said.

"Didn't you say you were needed elsewhere?" Her eyes widened, "And that my brother was not capable of surviving without you?"

"I never said such words!" He replied.

"I will tell my brother what you said if you don't come to Varuktesh with me." She said.

"Do as you must," Aldren replied, "Leaving Nivarash in ruins will bring far more shame to my name than the rumors a little girl spreads!"

"Little girl?" She screamed, "I am the daughter of king Varesh!"

"Exactly," He said, "You have nothing else to offer except for that."

"I do!" She said with her eyes full of tears, "You will see!"

Aldren felt a pain in his chest, he regrated treating the girl as such just because she disagreed with him.

"I'm sorry." He whispered.

"What was that?" She said not turning around.

She stood facing the wall in a corner of the room crying lightly.

Aldren walked toward her and embraced her from behind.

"I said I'm sorry," He said, "I did not mean to upset you."

"You should think about the consequences of your actions before you act!" She said crying.

"Fine!" He said.

She turned back facing him, her eyes locked in his.

Her green eyes were moist, the skin around them was almost red.

Aldren saw the damage he caused, just like what he did in Nivarash.

"This is all that i do isn't it?" He said wiping a tear off the girl's face.

"What is?" She asked sobbing.

"I leave things in ruins," He said, "This has to change."

"How?" She asked.

"I will rebuild better," He said, "Starting with you."

"With me?" She asked.

"Yes," He said, "I want to fix the damage i caused in you and then fix the damage I caused in Nivarash."

"What do you mean by fix?" She asked.

A drop of tear slid down her cheek, Aldren kissed it away.

"I will rebuild institutions, schools, and hospitals in Nivarash, a new state under the Lion banner." He said looking out the window.

The mountains close to them were clear, the mountains behind them were full of snow.

The Pale disk slipped between them, playing the games of its own.

"I mean me!" She slapped him in the face.

"Oh," He said, "I never read a book to know how to do that but i will try."

"That works." She placed her hand on his face.

"Will you help me rebuild Nivarash?" He asked.

"I will." She replied.

"Maybe I can learn to fix the damage i caused between us in the event of fixing something together." He said.

"Maybe." She said.

"Guard!" He called.

"Yes your majesty." A guard stepped inside.

"Send word to our allies," Aldren said, "We need reinforcements for first light."

"Right away your majesty." He said closing the door.

"What do you need reinforcements for?" She asked.

"To protect my queen." Aldren smiled.

She grabbed his hand and dragged him back to bed, the two stayed there until night time.

The Lunar dominated the sky, kicking the Pale disk off the throne.

Her children appeared sparsely in the darkness, showing themselves.

The two remained in bed cuddling, Aldren was already asleep, but the girl had a lot to think about.

But a curve decorated her face, a devilish smile that showed a satisfaction.

Perhaps a satisfaction of a conqueror after a victory, or perhaps just a childish happiness of finding her home...

Chapter Nine

The Pale disk had already climbed above the mountains when Aldren left the castle of Orinthal.

The morning was cold, colder than the one before it, but the king did not complain.

Reysha rode beside him, wrapped in a thick brown cloak that covered most of her body, her brown hair escaping from beneath the hood whenever the wind passed through the road.

The soldiers followed behind them.

Some carried the Lion banner.

Others carried the banners of the Orinthal's crown crest.

The road to Nivarash had changed since the last time Aldren had travelled upon it.

The snow had been cleared in places.

Broken carts had been removed.

Bodies had disappeared beneath the ground.

The destruction of the battle remained everywhere, but the land no longer looked abandoned.

People had returned to work now that there was no sign of horror.

Aldren looked toward the distant mountains.

"The Iceberg should be visible soon." He said, "The first thing I want to see is how much of it truly survived."

Reysha looked at him.

"You mean how much of it you destroyed." She said, "You should learn to use better words."

Aldren smiled.

"I destroyed the old Nivarash." Aldren said, "Perhaps I will build a better one."

"You said that yesterday." Reysha said, "I want to see whether you mean it or you have learned political lies like the rest of your allies."

Aldren looked at her.

"You will." Aldren said, "I intend to make sure of it."

The mountains grew larger before them.

The road narrowed between two great walls of stone, and the wind became stronger as they climbed.

Reysha moved her horse closer to Aldren.

"What happens first?" She asked, "Do we speak to the tribal leaders or do you inspect the Iceberg?"

"We speak first." Aldren said, "If I begin ordering people around before we understand what they want, they will spend the whole meeting defending themselves."

Reysha laughed.

"You have finally learned something about trading." She said, "A merchant does not begin by telling a man what he must buy."

"I am no merchant." Aldren frowned.

"Of course not." Reysha said, "You are a king who happens to care very much about prices."

Aldren shook his head.

The wind passed between them, and the Iceberg appeared at last.

Aldren stopped his horse.

The great castle stood beneath the mountains like a wounded beast that refused to die.

Much of the old structure had collapsed.

Several towers had fallen.

The outer wall had been broken in three different places.

But it was alive.

Smoke rose from inside the castle.

Wooden scaffolds covered the eastern side.

Men stood upon them, carrying blocks of stone.

Others were pulling ropes connected to large pieces of timber.

The sound of hammers travelled through the mountains.

Aldren stared closely to observe the process.

"We have already begun." He said, "That is good."

Reysha smiled.

"You sound surprised." She replied.

"I expected ruins." Aldren said, "I did not expect people to begin rebuilding this quickly."

"People do not always wait for kings to tell them what to do." She replied, "That is another thing you should learn."

Aldren looked at her.

"Do you intend to teach me everything?" He said.

"Only the things you are willing to learn." Reysha said, "The rest will take longer."

They continued down the road.

The gates of the Iceberg had not been repaired yet, so they entered through the opening where the doors had once stood.

Soldiers from the United Lions guarded the road.

Tribesmen worked beside them.

No one attacked, no one fled another.

They simply watched the king enter the place he had conquered.

Inside, the streets beyond the frozen lake were crowded.

Workers carried stones of marble.

Women prepared food beside open fires.

Children moved between the adults, watching everything with wide eyes.

Aldren saw a man placing a wooden roof over a house that had lost its walls.

He saw another carrying water.

The realm had begun to repair itself before anyone had decided what it would become.

Reysha looked around.

"We should build the first bazaar here." She said, "Near this road."

"Why here?" Aldren asked.

"Because every person entering Nivarash will pass through this place." She said,

"Merchants will not travel deep into a ruined realm looking for customers."

Aldren looked toward the road.

"That would make it easy for Orinthal merchants to enter as well." He smiled.

"Exactly." Reysha said, "And easy for Nivarash merchants to leave."

Aldren smiled.

"You were already planning this." He said.

"I told you." Reysha said, "I am good at trading."

"I know." Aldren nodded.

She looked at him.

"You finally admit it." She said.

"I am not stupid." Aldren said, "I can recognize a useful skill."

"I am beginning to wonder whether you mean that as a compliment." Reysha replied, "But I shall accept it anyway."

They reached the great hall.

The tribal leaders were waiting.

The same men who had stood against the United Lions during the battle now stood beneath the Lion banner.

Some looked tired, some angry and some simply looked uncertain.

Aldren entered, Reysha followed.

A long wooden table had been placed in the center of the hall.

The old throne was gone.

No one had rebuilt it.

Aldren looked at the empty space where it had once stood.

"Who decided that the throne should remain empty?" Aldren asked, "I want to know before we begin."

An old man with white hair stood.

"I did." He said, "The throne belonged to the rulers of Nivarash."

Aldren looked at the empty place.

"And now?" He asked.

"Nivarash does not have a ruler." The man replied, "Not anymore."

Aldren walked toward the table.

"Then we shall not pretend there is one." Aldren said, "Let us speak as people who have something to build."

He sat, pulling a chair.

Reysha sat beside him.

The tribal leaders took their places.

For a moment no one spoke.

Then one of the younger leaders leaned forward.

"You conquered our lands." He said, "Why should we believe this is a negotiation?"

Aldren looked at him.

"Because if I wanted to command you, you would not be sitting at this table." Aldren said, "You would be standing before me."

The man remained silent.

Reysha placed her hands upon the table.

"What do your people need?" She asked, "I don't ask of all the needs they ever had, but what do they need now?"

The old man looked toward her.

"Food." He said, "Homes, roads, and protection."

Reysha nodded.

"Those are necessities." She said, "What do they need to prosper?"

"Prosper?" The man frowned.

"Yes." Reysha said, "A population cannot live forever by repairing what was destroyed."

Aldren watched her.

"You need markets." She continued, "You need merchants, you need goods moving between Nivarash and other realms."

The younger leader looked at Aldren.

"So this is about profit." He said.

Aldren smiled.

"Of course it is." Aldren said, "Why would I lie to you about something so obvious?"

The man seemed caught off guard.

Reysha smiled.

"The Lion banners will profit." She said,

"Nivarash will profit as well."

"How?" The leader asked.

"Your people will have places to sell what they produce." Reysha said, "Our merchants will bring what you cannot produce quickly enough."

"What will the alliance bring us?" He said.

"Food, medicine, tools, cloth, wood, metal and whatever else the first years of rebuilding

require." Reysha said, "And your people will pay a fair price for what they receive."

The leader looked toward Aldren.

"You will not simply provide it?" He asked.

"No." Aldren said, "I want a trading realm, not a dependent one."

The old man nodded slowly.

"And the bazaars?" He asked.

"We will establish them together." Aldren said, "The first ones will be built near the main roads."

"One should be built inside the Iceberg."

Reysha interrupted, "Another should be built near the southern road."

The leader looked at her.

"Why two?" He asked.

"Because one market is easily controlled."

Reysha said, "Two markets create competition."

Aldren looked at the tribal leaders.

"She is right." Aldren said, "The markets will belong to your people."

The younger leader narrowed his eyes.

"And the merchants?" He asked.

"Orinthal's merchants will receive permission to trade there." Aldren said, "Nivarash merchants will receive permission to trade in Orinthal."

"What will you charge?" He asked.

"Nothing for the first year." Aldren said, "After that we negotiate."

Several of the leaders looked at one another.

"You would give us a year without taxes?" The old man asked, "Why?"

"Because a market without merchants is only an empty square." Aldren said, "I would rather collect something from a living market than nothing from a dead one."

Reysha smiled.

"That is the first sensible thing you have said this morning." She said, "I approve."

Aldren looked at her.

"I have said many sensible things." He whispered in her ear.

"Not while I was listening." Reysha replied, "Perhaps you should try harder."

The tribal leaders laughed.

The tension in the room weakened.

Aldren waited until the laughter disappeared.

"The hospital comes next." He said, "Nivarash needs more than one."

The leaders looked at each other.

"We have physicians." The old man spoke.

"You have some." Aldren said, "But they lack numbers."

"What will you do?" The leader asked.

"I will send physicians from Orinthal." Aldren said, "They will establish the first hospital."

"And then what?" The younger leader asked, "Will they remain?"

"No." Aldren replied, "They will teach."

The man stared at him.

"Teach?" One asked.

"Every physician who comes here will train people from Nivarash." Aldren said, "The hospital will become yours in time."

Reysha leaned forward.

"And the hospital should not remain inside the Iceberg." She said, "A second one should be established outside the castle."

"Why?" Another leader asked.

"Because people who live outside the walls should not have to enter the capital to survive." Reysha said, "Trade should spread through the realm, and so should medicine."

Aldren nodded.

"That will be done." He said, "The first hospitals will be built at the same time as the markets."

"What else?" The old man looked down.

"Schools." Aldren said.

Several men shifted in their seats.

"Schools?" One asked, "Why now?"

"Because rebuilding without teaching is only repairing the present." Aldren said, "I intend to build a future."

"And who will teach our children?" The younger leader crossed his arms.

"Teachers from Orinthal." Aldren said, "At first."

"At first?" The man frowned.

"They will teach your people to become teachers." Aldren replied, "Eventually most of your schools will be run by Nivarash."

"What will they teach?" The old man looked toward Reysha.

Reysha answered before Aldren could.

"Reading, writing, mathematics and history." She said, "The children should know the history of their own realm before others."

Aldren looked at her.

"And they should know the history of the war." Aldren said, "This will teach them how to prevent one from ever happening again."

The room became silent.

The younger leader watched him.

"You would allow our children to learn how we lost?" He asked.

"I would allow them to learn why." Aldren replied, "Those are different things."

No one answered.

Outside the hall, a hammer struck stone.

Everyone heard it.

Another hammer followed.

Then another.

The Iceberg was being rebuilt while they discussed how its people would live inside it.

Aldren looked toward the broken window.

"We will also build research centers." He said, "Scientists from Varuktesh will come first light."

One of the tribal leaders laughed.

"Scientists?" He said.

"Yes." Aldren said, "You sound surprised."

"I am." The man replied, "What could scientists possibly want from Nivarash?"

"The mountains." Aldren said, "The frozen waters, the soil, the plants and the minerals beneath your land."

Reysha continued.

"And perhaps things that you do not know you possess." She said, "Knowledge can become wealth just as easily as gold."

The leader looked uncertain.

"Who will own what they discover?" He asked.

Aldren smiled.

"Now you are asking the right question."

Aldren said, "If a discovery comes entirely from Nivarash, Nivarash owns it."

"And if Varuktesh creates something here?"

He asked.

"Varuktesh owns what it creates." Aldren replied, "If both work together, both profit."

Reysha nodded.

"That will encourage them to continue working together." She said, "No one invests in

a place where another person can simply take the result."

The old man looked toward the younger leaders.

They whispered among themselves.

Aldren did not interrupt.

He had learned that negotiation was not about speaking the most.

It was about knowing when silence was worth more than words.

Eventually the old man raised his head.

"We accept the schools." He said, "And the hospitals."

Another leader nodded.

"We accept the bazaars." He said, "But our merchants must be trained."

"They will be trained." Reysha said, "Merchants from Orinthal will remain here long enough to teach them how to trade beyond Nivarash."

"And they will have the right to trade with Orinthal directly?" An older man asked.

"Yes." Reysha replied, "There will be no middle man between the two."

The younger leader looked at Aldren.

"And the army?" He asked.

"What about it?" Aldren leaned forward.

"You conquered us with soldiers." The man said, "Now you want to leave soldiers here."

"Only enough to protect the roads while rebuilding begins." Aldren said, "I will not occupy Nivarash forever."

The words caused a murmur across the table.

The older man looked at him.

"Then who protects us when they leave?" He asked.

"You." Aldren said, "That is why I will send a general to train your troops."

"Our commanders will remain?" He asked.

"Yes." Aldren replied, "Your commanders remain yours."

"And your general?" Another asked.

"His task is to teach." Aldren said, "Not to rule."

The younger man looked toward Reysha.

"And if we refuse to listen?" He asked.

Reysha smiled.

"Then your soldiers will remain as they are."

She said, "And when the next enemy comes,

you will discover whether pride is an effective

military strategy."

Aldren laughed.

The younger man did not.

"You seem very confident." He said.

"I trade for a living." Reysha replied,

"Confidence is cheaper than gold."

Aldren looked at the men.

"The general will train your troops in formations, discipline, communication and battlefield strategy." He said, "Your soldiers know this land better than ours ever will."

"And the roads?" The old man nodded.

"Orinthal will send workers and engineers." Aldren said, "The roads connecting Nivarash and Orinthal will be repaired first."

"Why those roads?" One asked.

"So merchants can travel." Reysha said, "The merchants will pay for themselves eventually."

Aldren looked at her.

"And soldiers will travel." He added.

"And soldiers." Reysha replied, "But I prefer roads carrying goods."

"That is because goods rarely stab you." Aldren said.

"That is why I prefer them." She said.

The room laughed again.

Aldren looked around the table.

There was something strange about the sight.

A few days ago these people had watched armies destroy their kingdom.

Now they were arguing about roads and markets.

Perhaps peace did not begin when soldiers stopped fighting.

Perhaps it began when people became concerned with ordinary things again.

Aldren stood.

"The agreement is simple." He said, "Nivarash will rebuild its own realm."

The leaders listened.

"Orinthal will provide merchants, builders, physicians, teachers and soldiers to train your people." Aldren continued, "Varuktesh will provide scientists to establish research centers."

He pointed toward the broken walls.

"The Iceberg will be rebuilt." He said.

Then toward the road.

"The roads will be rebuilt." He added.

Then toward the people outside.

"The schools and hospitals will be built." He called.

He looked at the tribal leaders.

"And the bazaars will connect your people to ours." He shouted.

The old man slowly stood.

"And what does the Lion banner receive?" He asked, "What do you truly want from Nivarash?"

Aldren looked at him.

"Profit." He said, "Trade, stability, and a realm that does not need to be put in its place again."

The man smiled faintly.

"You speak honestly for a conqueror." He said.

"I have no reason to lie." Aldren replied, "You already know what I can do with an army."

Reysha stood beside him.

"And now they will learn what you can do without one." She said, "That may be more important."

Aldren looked at her.

For a moment he remembered the words he had spoken to her before leaving Orinthal.

Now the broken walls stood around him.

It was easy to say that something would be rebuilt.

It was harder to make people believe in the thing being rebuilt.

He looked toward the Pale disk shining through the broken ceiling.

The light touched the stones.

It touched the workers.

It grabbed the soldiers by the arms.

Then it touched the tribesmen who had once fought against the Lion banner and now carried stones beneath it.

The Pale disk did not distinguish between the conqueror and the conquered.

It simply gave its light.

Aldren wondered whether that was wisdom or indifference.

Perhaps the difference between the two belonged only to those standing beneath it.

A sound came from outside.

The people in the hall turned.

A large section of the eastern wall had just been raised into place.

Workers shouted in celebration.

Some of the soldiers joined them.

The children outside began running toward the wall to see it.

Reysha smiled.

"It looks better already." She said, "Perhaps you are not completely hopeless."

Aldren smiled.

"Perhaps you are beginning to like Nivarash." He said.

"I like things that become more valuable." Reysha said.

Aldren looked toward the road again.

Merchants would soon come through it.

Teachers would travel through it.

Physicians would travel through it.

Scientists would come from distant lands.

Soldiers would train beneath the Lion banner.

The ruined realm would become a place where people traded, learned, healed and discovered.

The old Nivarash was dead.

Perhaps that was necessary.

Perhaps every realm had to die once before it understood what it could become.

Aldren walked out of the hall, Reysha followed him.

Behind them the tribal leaders remained at the table, continuing their discussion.

Outside, the sound of the hammers had grown louder.

The Iceberg was being rebuilt as they spoke.

And the Pale disk remained above Nivarash, watching the first stones of a new realm being placed upon the ruins of the old one...

Chapter Ten

The Pale disk had already begun its journey across the sky when the bells of Zarim's Tree called the kings toward the great hall.

Their sound travelled through the fortress and entered every chamber, every corridor, every room where servants moved quietly beneath the branches of the ancient tree.

The fortress of Zarim was built to serve a different purpose rather than host kings.

Its walls were thick enough to withstand armies.

Its towers were tall enough to watch the roads before enemies reached them.

Its hall had been carved beneath the great roots of the Tree of Zarim, where the oldest stories of the realm had been told long before the crowns that now sat upon the heads of living men had existed.

Today, beneath those roots, the United Lions would decide whether one of their own had betrayed them.

King Aldren Varesh entered first.

Reysha followed beside him.

She wore a dark brown dress beneath a cloak of the same color, and her brown hair rested over one shoulder.

Aldren looked toward the great obsidian table in the center of the hall.

Five seats had been prepared for the kings.

A sixth chair stood beside Rivak Korvael's place.

Reysha walked toward it without hesitation.

Rivak looked at his sister.

Then he looked at Aldren.

He said nothing.

Reysha sat beside Aldren.

Aldren pulled the chair closer to the table.

Rivak remained standing for a moment longer.

King Odran Eramushar entered through the opposite doors.

He was followed by two guards who stopped outside.

Then came King Jaffarion the wise.

He walked slowly, carrying no sword.

Finally, Maelor Kalthaer entered.

He did not hurry.

He did not look worried.

He simply walked toward his place and sat down.

Rivak remained standing.

Aldren watched him.

Odran looked from one king to another.

Jaffarion rested both hands upon the table.

The hall became silent.

Above them, the branches of the Tree of Zarim stretched across the ceiling.

The leaves moved gently whenever the wind entered through the narrow windows.

For generations, kings had gathered beneath that tree to decide who should rule, who should fight and who should die.

The fortress called the Tree was the heritage of Zarim.

Today they gathered to decide whether an alliance could survive the truth.

Rivak finally sat.

He looked toward Maelor.

"I found something in Nivarash." Rivak said, "Something that concerns every king sitting at this table."

Kalthaer did not answer.

Rivak placed a folded piece of parchment upon the table.

The obsidian table claimed the piece of paper in its white veins glowing in the golden light of the early morning.

The members looked at it closely.

Kalthaer looked at the parchment.

"The Queen of Nivarash wrote this." Rivak said, "I found it in her chamber after the castle fell."

Kalthaer leaned back.

"What does it say?" Odran asked, "And why have you brought it here?"

Rivak unfolded the parchment.

"It says that Maelor Kalthaer was the ally of Nivarash." He said, "It says he promised the Queen that troops would be sent against us."

Aldren's eyes remained upon Kalthaer.

Rivak continued.

"It says that the Queen waited for those troops." He said, "She believed they were coming."

He placed his hand upon the parchment.

"They never came." He read raising his head.

No one spoke.

The wind moved through the leaves above them.

Kalthaer finally leaned forward.

"Is that all?" He asked, "You gathered five kings in the Tree of Zarim to tell them that I lied to a dead queen?"

Rivak's expression hardened.

"You lied to an enemy while claiming to stand with us." Rivak said, "Do not make the difference smaller than it is."

"I did not make it smaller." Kalthaer replied, "I made it useful."

Odran looked toward him.

"Explain." He said, "Because there is a great difference between deception and treason, and I would rather hear your words before I decide which one this was."

Kalthaer smiled faintly.

"That is why I expected you to speak first." He said, "You were the one I was defending."

Odran frowned.

"You were defending Artamur." Odran said, "You sent soldiers to my borders for backup."

"I did more than send soldiers." Kalthaer replied, "I kept an army from marching through them."

Rivak struck the table with his hand.

"You promised the same number of troops that you sent for Artamur to Nivarash while we

were fighting in the snow." He said, "And you call that a defense?"

"Yes." Kalthaer said, "I call it the reason you are alive."

Rivak stood.

Aldren remained seated.

"Choose your next words carefully." Rivak said, "For they will decide your fate."

"What are you going to do?" Kalthaer replied, "I did what I had to do!"

Reysha looked toward Aldren.

Aldren noticed.

Neither spoke.

Jaffarion lifted one hand.

"Sit." He said, "Both of you."

Rivak sat.

Kalthaer remained calm.

Jaffarion looked at the parchment.

"You were allied with Nivarash." He said, "Yes or no?"

Kalthaer looked directly at him.

"Yes." He said, "For a time."

Odran stared at him.

"You admit it." Odran said, "Then what exactly are we debating?"

"We are debating whether the alliance was a betrayal." Kalthaer replied, "And you are attempting to decide that before understanding what the alliance accomplished."

Rivak shook his head.

"You promised troops." Rivak said, "You promised to burry us in the snow for the other side."

"I did." Kalthaer said, "And because I did, they believed they could win."

Aldren leaned forward.

"That belief was useful." Aldren said, "Because they waited for you."

Kalthaer looked toward him.

"Yes." He replied, "They did."

Rivak turned toward Aldren.

"You are defending him?" He said with widened eyes.

Aldren shook his head.

"I am considering his reasons." Aldren said,

"Those are different things."

Reysha smiled slightly.

Odran noticed her.

"What do you think?" Odran asked, "You have been silent all this time."

Reysha placed her hand upon the table.

"I think the letter proves Kalthaer was lying." She said, "But it does not prove that his lie harmed us."

Rivak looked at his sister.

"It nearly got us killed, all of us." He said.

"Nearly is not did." Reysha replied, "We are speaking about a battle that we won."

Rivak looked at Aldren.

"You fought in that snow with me." He said.

"I did." Aldren said, "And I remember what the Iceberg looked like when we first saw it."

"What did you see?" Jaffarion asked.

Aldren looked toward the branches above them.

"There was no possible way we would have survived the march that killed thousands before us." He said, "I thought of that the first

day we fought shoulder to shoulder on the frozen lake and the day we entered the hall."

Rivak leaned forward.

"Are you implying that if this man didn't use his schemes," He said, "We would have lost the battle?"

Aldren looked at him.

"Without a proper tactic that you and I thought we had, yes." He said.

The hall became silent again.

Kalthaer smiled.

"Now we are beginning to speak honestly." He said, "That is all I have wanted."

Rivak's eyes narrowed.

"How can you be proud of this?" He said with lower voice.

"I am proud that the plan worked." Kalthaer said, "I am not proud of what we had to wreck to achieve our goals."

Odran looked down.

"Why did you promise twice the number of men we had to the opposite side if your

intentions were to build toward our victory?"

He said.

Kalthaer answered without hesitation.

"It was a tactic young one."

"Of what nature?" Odran asked.

"Tactics don't have to be clean and

honarable!" Kalthaer replied.

"There is no trusting men who play

games." Rivak laughed bitterly.

"You will not win a game if you don't play."

Kalthaer said.

"A War is not a game!" Rivak said.

"You are a king." Kalthaer replied, "It will be someday."

Jaffarion looked toward him.

"Explain the tactic from the beginning." He said, "No excuses, tell us what you intended."

Kalthaer rested his hands together.

"Nivarash had more soldiers than we did." He said, "The Iceberg could not be taken by strength alone, the snow would kill the Lion army before the walls did."

Aldren nodded slowly.

"That was true." He said, "We lost men before we reached the castle."

Kalthaer continued.

"The Queen believed that Artamur was isolated." He said, "She believed I was preparing to strike from the south with an army large enough to force the United Lions to divide themselves."

Odran looked at him.

"You made her believe I was weak." He shook his head.

"I made her believe you were worth attacking."

Kalthaer said, "There is a difference."

Odran leaned back.

"And what happened?" He asked.

"She spared half her army to accompany us."

Kalthaer replied, "She sent them to Artamur."

"That is why the Avalanche didn't wipe us out." Rivak spoke.

"Yes." Kalthaer said, "You entered the gates while her army fought for our cause."

Aldren looked at the parchment.

"You turned their confidence against them."

He said, "You allowed them to believe that another army would save them, so they did not prepare for the attack."

"Exactly." Kalthaer smiled.

Rivak stared at Aldren.

"And you still believe this was harmless?" He asked.

"No." Aldren said, "I believe it was a dangerous game."

Kalthaer looked at him.

"And I believe it was also brilliant." Aldren continued.

Rivak's face hardened.

"Brilliant?" He asked.

"Yes." Aldren said, "Because if Kalthaer didn't play games, we would have never stood a chance against the Avalanche nor the walls of the Iceberg."

Reysha leaned slightly toward Aldren.

"And the Queen would remain undefeated." She said, "She believed she was waiting for victory, this illusion made her fall."

"She was a victim of a tactic that we did not even consider." Aldren looked at her.

Reysha nodded.

"That is the cruelest part of the plan." She said, "Not that Kalthaer lied, but that he made her believe she still had the upper hand."

Jaffarion closed his eyes for a moment.

"Then the letter is true." He said, "The Queen was deceived."

"Yes." Kalthaer said, "And that deception helped us win."

Rivak stood again.

"You speak as though victory removes every crime." He said.

Kalthaer looked at him.

"No." He said, "Nothing is pure enough to remove crime or guilt."

"Then why pull such games that you will regret?" Rivak said.

"To win." Kalthaer said, "You will learn as you wear the crown."

Rivak looked toward Odran.

"How convenient." He said.

Odran did not answer.

Instead, he looked at Kalthaer.

"If Nivarash gained the upper hand would you have joined the other side?" He asked.

"Yes." Kalthaer said.

Odran nodded slowly.

"Then you play to win." He said, "You know no loyalty or banner."

"Exactly." Kalthaer smiled.

"That is madness." Rivak shook his head.

"It is strategy." Kalthaer replied.

"It is treachery." He said.

"I consider sometimes that I might have made a mistake by not delivering my promise," Maelor Kalthaer replied, "Then no one would accuse me of anything."

"That is precisely what frightens me." Rivak pointed at him.

Kalthaer did not move.

"Good." He said, "A king who never frightens his equals is not doing his duty."

Jaffarion looked at Aldren.

"You fought beside Rivak." He said, "You entered the Iceberg together."

"I did." Aldren nodded.

"Then tell us your verdict." He said.

Aldren looked around the table.

Reysha watched him more closely than anyone.

"I think the actions of king Kalthaer served the United Lions." Aldren finally spoke.

Rivak's jaw tightened.

"But?" He asked.

Aldren looked at Kalthaer.

"But having a dangerous mind as an ally is as frightening as having them as an enemy." He said.

"That is fair." Kalthaer nodded.

"The problem is not that he deceived Nivarash." Aldren continued, "Kings deceive enemies every day."

"The problem is that the United Lions were never told that he had done it." Rivak frowned.

"You are young, you would have opposed the plan." Kalthaer looked at him.

"Yes." Aldren said, "And that is exactly why you kept it hidden."

A silence followed.

Kalthaer looked toward the branches of the tree.

"Yes." He said, "I will take the chances that times provide for me."

Jaffarion raised an eyebrow.

"And what is it benefits the opposing side?" He said.

"I will stand trial on that day." Kalthaer looked toward him.

"yes." Jaffarion said, "But keeping secrets from your allies is not noble."

Odran nodded.

"I agree." Odran said, "Discussing it would make the plan more effective."

"You approve of this?" Rivak looked at him.

"I planned the battle." Odran replied, "We had no other options."

Rivak lowered his head.

Odran looked toward Kalthaer.

"His actions saved your lives." He said, "And won a great victory for the Lion banner." He said.

Kalthaer said nothing.

"But none of us should take control of what belongs to us all." Odran continued, "That cannot become a habit."

"What do you propose?" Kalthaer looked toward Aldren.

Aldren looked at the parchment.

"An agreement." He said, "No Lion may leave their plans and tactics secret from the others henceforth."

"Strategy is never a law, its a game." Kalthaer smiled.

"There must be trust between allies." Aldren said.

Reysha looked at Rivak.

"He is right." She said, "An alliance cannot survive if every king believes he must discover the truth after the battle."

"You trust him very easily." Rivak turned toward his sister.

Reysha smiled.

"I trust results." She said, "And I trust Aldren when he knows the difference between courage and foolishness."

"That is one of the nicest things you have ever said about me." Aldren looked at her.

"It was not a compliment." Reysha replied, "I spoke the true."

Odran laughed.

Jaffarion smiled.

Even Rivak allowed himself a brief smile before his expression returned to seriousness.

Kalthaer folded his hands.

"So this is it?" He asked, "You will declare me a traitor?"

"No." Jaffarion said.

Kalthaer looked toward him.

Jaffarion continued.

"The letter will remain evidence of what happened." He said, "But there will be no judgment of treason against Maelor Kalthaer."

"Why?" Rivak looked at him.

"Because he did not use Nivarash to destroy us." Jaffarion replied, "He used Nivarash to prevent the destruction of the United Lions."

"Only because the tactic succeeded." Rivak looked toward Kalthaer.

Jaffarion shook his head.

"No." He said, "Because intent matters."

Kalthaer watched him carefully.

"If his intention had been to weaken us, the verdict would be different." Jaffarion said,

"But his intention was to win the battles for our cause."

"I agree." Odran nodded.

"And you?" Rivak looked toward Aldren.

"I agree." Aldren answered immediately.

Rivak turned toward his sister.

Reysha looked at him.

"I agree." She said, "But he should be remembered as a dangerous ally."

"Dangerous is acceptable." Kalthaer smiled.

"Do not enjoy it too much." Reysha replied.

Kalthaer laughed quietly.

Jaffarion placed his hand upon the parchment.

"Then let the verdict be spoken clearly." He said, "Maelor Kalthaer did enter an alliance with Nivarash and did promise troops he never intended to send."

Kalthaer remained silent.

"The act was deception." Jaffarion continued, "But it was not treason against the United Lions."

He looked toward the other kings.

"The tactic protected Artamur, weakened Nivarash and prevented the Iceberg from wiping our armies on the right wing of the war."

Rivak lowered his eyes.

"Therefore Maelor Kalthaer remains a member of the United Lions." Jaffarion raised his voice.

The hall remained silent.

"However." Jaffarion said, "No king of the United Lions shall again enter a secret deals

with other realms without the knowledge of the others."

Kalthaer nodded.

"Agreed." He said, "Though I warn you now that future enemies may not give us the courtesy of waiting for a council."

"Then we shall act faster than they will." Aldren smiled.

"That is the answer I wanted." Kalthaer looked at him.

Rivak placed his palm upon the table.

"I accept the verdict." He said, "But I will remember this day."

"You should." Kalthaer looked toward him.

"I will." Rivak replied, "And if this day is to be repeated I will hold you accountable."

"If we both live long enough to see such a day again." Kalthaer smiled.

"That was not a joke." Rivak frowned.

"I know." Kalthaer said.

The tension did not disappear.

It simply changed.

The United Lions had not broken.

But neither had they become the same alliance they had been before the letter was found.

Perhaps alliances were never made stronger by pretending their members were identical.

Perhaps they became stronger when men learned exactly what they could expect from one another.

Aldren looked toward Reysha.

She was already looking at him.

Their eyes met only for a moment.

Then she looked away.

None of the members noticed.

Jaffarion was studying the letter.

Kalthaer was studying the room.

Aldren slowly stood.

"There is one final matter." He said.

Jaffarion looked up.

"Another matter?" He asked, "I had thought the dangerous part of this meeting was finished."

"This one is not about war." Aldren replied.

"What is it?" Rivak looked at him.

Aldren remained standing.

He looked toward Rivak.

Then toward Reysha.

She had gone completely still.

Aldren reached down and placed his hand upon the table.

"I want your approval for something." He said, "Not as king to king, but as a friend."

Rivak's expression changed.

"What for?" He asked.

"I want to marry your sister." Aldren looked at Reysha.

The hall became silent.

Reysha looked at Aldren.

For the first time that day, she seemed unable to find an answer immediately.

Rivak stared at his sister.

Then at Aldren.

Then back at his sister.

"You?" Rivak asked.

Reysha smiled.

"Yes." She said.

"How long have you been planning this?"

Rivak looked toward Aldren.

"Long enough." Aldren smiled.

Reysha laughed softly.

"Not long enough." She said, "He has a habit of deciding important things after pretending he has not decided them."

"That is not true." Aldren looked at her.

Rivak looked from one to the other.

There was something in the way they spoke.

Something he had not noticed before.

Something he now could not fail to notice.

"How long have you two been together to decide this?" He said.

Aldren looked at her.

Neither answered immediately.

Rivak slowly leaned back.

"I should have known." He said.

"You were too busy to notice your only sister."

Reysha laughed.

"You could have asked me before telling five kings." Rivak looked at Aldren.

"I could have." Aldren said, "But she will be a significant member as my queen after the wedding, so they must know."

"She is still young." Rivak stared at him.

"She will not find a better man than me." Aldren said.

Rivak was silent.

The wind moved through the branches of the Tree of Zarim.

The leaves whispered above the kings.

But the branches did not really move, they were made of metal.

At last Rivak stood.

He walked around the table.

He stopped before Aldren.

Then he placed one hand upon Aldren's shoulder.

"You have my approval." Rivak said, "She will not find a better husband and I better friend."

"Thank you." Aldren smiled.

The room remained silent for a moment, it was the first time for everyone to see an older

man want permission for anything from a younger man.

"Well." He said, "That is one way to end a meeting about treason."

Jaffarion laughed.

"Perhaps every political meeting should end with a marriage proposal." He said, "It might improve attendance."

"Only if the kings learn to survive the discussion first." Reysha looked toward him.

Kalthaer remained seated.

He was smiling and playing with his mustache.

Rivak returned to his seat.

The six of them remained beneath the Tree of Zarim.

For a brief moment, Aldren wondered whether unity had ever meant agreement.

Perhaps it meant something of much more value.

Perhaps unity meant sitting beside a man whose methods frightened you and still

choosing to stand beside him when the enemy came.

The Pale disk moved higher.

Its light entered the hall through the windows above them.

It fell upon the Lion banners hanging from the walls.

Odran began speaking with Jaffarion about rebuilding the roads between their realms.

Kalthaer remained seated, watching the others.

His eyes were fixed on the parchment on the table.

Then he looked toward the branches above them.

The Tree of Zarim had stood through kings, wars, famines and victories.

It had seen crowns rise and fall.

It was almost time to leave.

Aldren walked beneath the Pale disk's might with Reysha beside him.

The Lion banners moved in the wind above the fortress.

And beneath the ancient Tree of Zarim, five banners decided that having an alliance in the time of war is crucial to them all and the argument was not serious enough to shatter the alliance.

The Pale disk continued across the heavens slowly.

The tree remained rooted in the earth, as The United Lions remained intact...