The Battle of Cursed Clouds



A novel by Shahriyar Eghdam Shargh

Chapter One

Before it all, the Pale Disk rose, shining its light upon Nerukhal of House Veyran, calling him to claim the opportunity that daylight offered him to make a change in life for the betterment of his family.

Nerukhal lived alone, but his younger brother Theran had a loving family of his own, so the two lived separately.

One had a family to attend to, while the other had a string of thoughts, wondering whether

he had made the right choice by never settling down and adding another branch to the Veyran bloodline.

Nerukhal had always believed that soldiers had a lot to deal with already, and a family was simply another responsibility among the weight they already carried.

But Theran was no soldier.

He had taken charge of a stall in the Bazar after working there as a delivery boy for years.

Theran and Elara had married when they were no more than young adults.

They chose to figure out life together rather than face it alone.

The result of this happy partnership was a young boy they named after Theran's uncle.

Phlintar.

But Nerukhal had never forgotten his family entirely.

He visited Theran, Elara, and their son every now and then.

Nerukhal had a similar plan for the day ahead.

He put on his armor after a splash of water touched his cleanly shaven face.

He looked into the brass in front of him, and the man in the brass looked back at him.

The two had a long stare before a voice in Nerukhal's head rang out.

"That's us, dummy!" the voice said.

Nerukhal jumped as he heard it, as he always did.

He gathered himself, forcing himself not to smile at what a small fraction of him had just told him.

Once the armor was tightly adjusted, he picked up his gear.

A regular sword with no modifications, as he preferred it, a baton, and an information board that all soldiers carried.

After he fastened everything according to regulations, he stepped toward the door.

Once he opened it, the Pale Disk welcomed him with a warm light, a light that all the people knew as a sign of hope and life.

He stood there for a moment before taking the first step into Zarim's streets, as he did every day.

Nerukhal was not a man who showed his emotions to anyone, so this was perhaps the only moment of the day when he could feel something without pretending to be a statue.

"We are late!" the voice in his head shouted suddenly.

His eyes opened wide at once when he heard it.

He gathered himself and found the purpose to put his foot on the whispering metal once again.

Every step clinked as he walked toward the Tree, as always.

The people greeted the experienced soldier.

They knew soldiers as the protectors and representatives of justice and law.

Children saluted him with sticks instead of swords.

People nodded as he walked.

Some vendors passed him fruit or whatever other snack they sold to show their love and support.

Nerukhal showed no sign of happiness, only appreciation.

This act of kindness from the people was so common that he had grown accustomed to it as he continued wearing the uniform and armor.

But deep down, he knew that if the people did not cheer when a soldier or a group of soldiers passed, he would have panicked.

As he walked closer to the Bazar, he watched closely.

Zarim was living through peaceful times, but there were always those who stole something in the Bazar, or vendors who sold their products for enormous profits to people whenever they did not see a sign of the law nearby.

Everything seemed as usual today.

Vendors put up clear signs of what they offered and at what price, while the crowd roamed in search of whatever they needed or desired at that very moment.

Every step he took brought something interesting into view.

Some people bought fruit.

Some bought ingredients for food.

Others enjoyed a snack they had purchased while watching a valuable statue a vendor claimed to have brought from Kelvard by boat.

"Kelvard," Nerukhal whispered to himself, shaking his head as he walked.

Kelvard had always been an ally of Zarim for as long as he could remember, but it was

simply too far away for a regular vendor to sail there and bring goods back to sell.

Such trips were usually made by a group of united vendors who bought a ship together and chose the life of merchants.

But merchants did not usually have enough free time to rent a stall in the Bazar and sell their goods firsthand.

"Let's take a look, shall we?" the voice in Nerukhal's head said as he remained occupied with his thoughts.

Nerukhal stepped closer to the vendor's stall through the crowd, but he was careful not to let the vendor notice him.

A crowd had gathered to offer their prices for the statue.

It was the vendor's lucky day so far.

Nerukhal watched closely.

"Twenty royal coins, sir!" one man shouted.

"Thirty, sir!" another called before the vendor had the chance to answer the first man.

"All I have is forty two royal coins, and I want this statue!" a woman screamed through the crowd.

The crowd went silent once they heard that price.

It was almost the pay of a whole week of hard work, and someone was offering it for a statue, Nerukhal thought to himself.

He spotted a spark in the vendor's eyes as he watched the woman carefully.

Then Nerukhal spoke.

"One hundred coins!"

The crowd opened, and Nerukhal and the vendor made eye contact for the first time.

But once the vendor saw Nerukhal's uniform, he showed no sign of panic.

"He might be telling the truth after all," the voice in Nerukhal's head said.

He had no choice but to agree with it.

"Great to see a soldier is interested in my sale!" the vendor said loudly enough for Nerukhal to hear through the crowd.

Nerukhal stepped forward to examine the statue.

He had been to Kelvard several times during his years of service, so he knew exactly what a statue made in the City of Rivers would look like.

Once he saw the statue up close, he immediately recognized the patterns.

It was a statue of Lady Lusesta, the Queen of Kelvard.

Nerukhal had been present at her crowning ceremony alongside the more experienced soldiers who had been sent to accompany Prince Maelor, heir to Zarim's throne and son of Vaelric Kalthaer.

The statue was an original artwork from Kelvard, so Nerukhal had no argument to make.

He had already made the deal with the vendor.

"Once a man speaks," Nerukhal told the vendor as he reached for his pocket, "he must do."

A curve appeared on the vendor's face as he stared at the coins on his stall.

He did not speak a word as Nerukhal stepped away, taking the statue with him.

It was a relatively large statue, but Nerukhal was a strong fellow.

Carrying it was nothing for a man of his reputation.

It was almost afternoon.

The Pale Disk had shifted its focus and changed its color, spilling orange light upon the Tree and whatever else it found worthy.

Nerukhal was unhappy with the trade he had made with the vendor.

He had spent most of his coins.

"It would make a perfect gift!" the voice in his head said suddenly.

It startled Nerukhal at first.

He had been drowned so deeply in his own thoughts that he was unaware of all else, even of his own thoughts at some point.

He smiled at the thought.

"This would be a great excuse to visit my brother and Elara," he whispered to himself.

He walked toward Theran's stall, but he did not see anyone inside.

"He always comes to work," the voice inside his head said.

Nerukhal could not agree more.

So he walked toward Theran's house.

It was not far from the stall.

Once he reached the threshold, he saw Theran playing a game with Phlintar while Elara was preparing food through the window.

He released a deep breath he had been holding for a long time.

Theran saw him before he knocked on the door.

His eyes sparked once he saw his older brother approaching after such a long time.

The door opened before Nerukhal could take another step.

"Welcome home, brother!" Theran shouted.

"I was worried when I did not see a sign of you in the stall," Nerukhal said, hugging his brother.

"You haven't heard?" Theran asked, shocked.

"Heard what?" Nerukhal replied.

"King Kalthaer died today," Theran answered.

Nerukhal's eyes widened.

"Why hasn't anyone told me?" he asked, frustrated.

"It's almost night time," Theran told him.

"Come in."

Nerukhal followed his brother inside without saying a word.

"Uncle!" young Phlintar shouted excitedly, sitting down with his eyes fixed on Nerukhal.

Nerukhal smiled once he saw the little man.

"He is growing every day," he said to Elara.

Elara nodded.

"Welcome home, brother," she said.

"When did they announce the news?"

Nerukhal asked, turning to Theran.

"Early morning," he replied.

"The messenger told me not to open my stall

today."

"But everyone else was there today," Nerukhal

said, shocked.

Theran stared at him.

"What do you..." he began to ask, but a harsh

knock on the door stopped him.

"Commander Nerukhal?" a young man called from the other side.

"Are you there?"

"Commander?" all of them asked, shocked.

Nerukhal proceeded to open the door curiously.

He was suspicious of what he had heard.

He was not a commander.

A young face appeared on the other side once the door opened.

He was a slim man in uniform and armor, with a helmet tightly wrapped around his head.

"Kalaron Rifaad reporting for duty, sir!" the young man shouted at his face.

"I am not your commander, young man," Nerukhal replied patiently.

"Sir, I have been assigned to your patrol!" the young man shouted again, handing him a paper sealed by the Tree.

Nerukhal took the paper in shock and opened it.

"By the order of the Crowned Prince," it read, "Nerukhal Veyran is now the commander of the Second Patrol of Zarim."

"Signed by Maelor Kalthaer," Nerukhal said, locking eyes with the young man.

"Yes, sir!" Kalaron replied.

"Why has no one informed me of the king's passing?" Nerukhal asked.

"I do not have that information, sir!" Kalaron replied.

"Your first task is to investigate this matter and gather all the other men who have been assigned to me," Nerukhal commanded.

But before Kalaron could say anything, Theran put his hand on Nerukhal's shoulder.

"Cut the boy some slack," he said.

"It's almost night time."

"Very well, then," Nerukhal sighed.

"Come in," Theran told Kalaron.

"I am on duty, sir!" Kalaron responded.

"Do I have to tell your commander?" Theran said, frowning.

"No, sir," Kalaron answered, walking inside.

The three and a half of them sat around the table to share a meal Elara had prepared.

"Take off your helmet and take a seat,"

Nerukhal told Kalaron.

"You're off duty now."

Kalaron chose a chair and sat down with the others.

They feasted on rich food and fruit, sharing wine and laughter that night, leaving the task of investigation for the next time the Pale Disk called them out of their beds in the morning.

Chapter Two

The light touched Nerukhal's face once again, reaching him through the window, as if it had seized the opportunity to fondle his hair now that he did not have a helmet on.

Nerukhal tried to resist the temptations of the morning, but no one could resist them, not even a disciplined soldier of the Tree.

Once he opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was the young man fully prepared and waiting by the door.

His armor was tight, his uniform was clean, his sword was charged and polished, and his helmet was under his arm.

But he was looking away. He had not noticed Nerukhal waking up.

So Nerukhal watched him closely for a moment.

The other soldiers knew him because of his dedication and focus.

That was his unique quality.

Young Kalaron was looking out the window, drowning in his thoughts.

"He is probably regretting the moment he signed up for duty," the voice in Nerukhal's head said.

He chose to ignore it, as he mostly did, but he could not reject its point.

The voice was almost always right.

Nerukhal finally gave in to his thoughts. He sat up and opened his eyes, hoping the voice would go away as it always did.

"You can't escape me," it said. "I am you!"

Young Kalaron noticed something moving in the far corner before Nerukhal got the chance to fully find himself.

Once Nerukhal's vision cleared, Kalaron was ready for duty.

Helmet on, baton fastened, and facing his commander, signaling that he was as ready as he could be.

Nerukhal looked around before he gained the ability to speak.

"Sir Theran and Lady Elara left early, sir!" Kalaron shouted.

His voice shook the room.

"Lower your voice!" Nerukhal replied. "You will wake up the kid!"

"They took Phlintar too, commander," Kalaron responded.

"Look at him!" the voice said in Nerukhal's head. "Not a day here and he learned everyone's names. Sharp boy!"

Nerukhal agreed. Kalaron was a talented young man indeed.

"Sir?" Kalaron said once he heard nothing from his commander.

"Alright then, let's get to work," Nerukhal said, clapping his hands together.

He had slept with his uniform and boots on, as always.

He just needed to put on his armor and helmet and find his gear.

Once his armor was adjusted and his helmet was on, he picked his sword from under the mat he slept on.

"Old habits, sir?" Kalaron asked softly.

Nerukhal responded with a sharp gaze that lasted for a moment.

Kalaron swallowed.

The baton was under the table, and his information board was on it.

"Let's move, soldier," Nerukhal said after he managed to gather everything the regulations forced him to carry.

The young man opened the door and walked outside after Nerukhal.

It was mid morning, and the Pale Disk was directly above them as they walked out.

"How many men are assigned to me?" Nerukhal asked Kalaron.

"They did not inform me of that, sir," Kalaron replied.

"We go to the Tree then," Nerukhal said softly.

Kalaron nodded, trying to catch up with him.

Nerukhal was much older than him, but he seemed to have grown accustomed to the additional weight that he had to carry every day for almost eight years.

Young Kalaron, on the other hand, had a lot to learn on his first week of duty.

Nerukhal was a few steps ahead, but still, it fascinated the young man how fast Nerukhal

walked with almost twice the weight he carried.

They could almost see the Bazar as they walked forward.

As they approached, Nerukhal noticed something odd. There was no one in the Bazar.

Every stall was closed, every corner abandoned.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked Kalaron.

"I have never seen the Bazar this empty, sir," Kalaron answered, catching his breath.

The Pale Disk was the only witness to their struggle to reach the Tree, or perhaps the only obstacle in their way.

It was the dry season. The air was hot, the light was sharp.

Their boots were almost melting on the ground.

Without the crowd, there was no shelter from the light and no shadows or beverages to endure the warmth of this forsaken season.

By noon, they made it to the corridors leading to the Tree.

"Sir, look," Kalaron said.

Nerukhal was walking with his head down. Once he looked up, he saw a shocking scene.

All the people were there, every vendor, every worker, and every blacksmith.

Before he could react to what he saw before him, a group of soldiers stepped forward.

"Are you Nerukhal Veyran, sir?" one of them asked.

Once Nerukhal looked up to answer, he saw the man's armor, not his face.

He was a tall fellow, so Nerukhal looked higher to see his face.

A clean shaven face showed soon enough, golden hair sticking out from the sides of his helmet.

"Yes, sir," Nerukhal replied once his eyes met the soldier's.

"My name is Caerion Rhaevan, sir." But before he could continue, Kalaron spoke.

"The Black Raven!" Kalaron said, shocked.

"The Guardian of the Black Raven banner, yes," the young prince chuckled.

"It is an honor to finally meet you, my prince," Nerukhal replied, frowning towards young Kalaron.

"As is mine, commander," the prince replied. "Shall we?" he continued.

Nerukhal and Kalaron followed the young prince through the crowd in front of the gates.

"Why are all these people here?" Nerukhal asked Caerion.

"With King Kalther's death," the prince replied, "there will be a debate on which of the highborn families would claim the crest of the crown."

The corridors were rich with white light. The stone on the ground was polished so carefully that Nerukhal could see himself in each of the pieces while he took every step.

"But Prince Maelor Kalthaer has already claimed the crown, sir," Kalaron answered.

Nerukhal tapped him on the arm before he fully finished his sentence, and before the prince turned back to reply.

"No prince can claim the crown without the unanimous verdict of all of the banners," Caerion replied without turning back.

"Except the time when Zarim is in immediate danger," Nerukhal replied.

"You know the law well," the prince replied. "That is why you were chosen commander."

Nerukhal remained silent as he walked.

A few steps ahead, there was a door blocking their way.

At first sight, the door was magnificent, a board of obsidian carved out of the heart of a

larger rock that was not easy nor cheap to find, decorated with gems of every banner's color.

A round Onyx for the Black Raven on top, white Moonstone for the White Phoenix to the right, a Tiger's Eye represented the Brown Hawk to the left, a beautiful Ruby shone in the bottom row as a symbol of the Red Owl, a blue Lapis Lazuli right next to it as the candidate for the Blue Jay, and finally, an Emerald shining green under the light of the Pale Disk that found its way through a window

nearby as a reminder of the Green Parrot's name.

Nerukhal knew these symbols. He was trained to recognize them. They were the highborn families of Zarim.

Each time a chosen member said farewell to the muddy globe, another prince was represented to be chosen as the new ruler of Zarim.

Today was that day.

Once Caerion pushed the door open, there was a council of six members on the other side.

All members were seated in chairs designed to represent their banners except for the Black Raven, around a table of obsidian, pitch black, so dark that Nerukhal thought he could drown in it, covered by veins of white all over.

Once the door fully opened, the young prince stood to the side, extending his hand forward to welcome the new commander and his companion.

"Come in, gentlemen," he said. "Welcome to the High Table."

All eyes fixed on Nerukhal and Kalaron, and their eyes were fixed on the glory they had never seen anything like before.

Chapter Three

Kalaron and Nerukhal entered the most secret room of the Tree for the first time of their lives.

Nerukhal was never invited into this room of secrets, and he did not know any fellow soldiers that did find way into this room before.

Nerukhal was new to his role, just like Kalaron was new to his own.

Prince Caerion still stood on the side of the door as they walked inside, but the other members were seated in their positions, ready to put up a fight for the crown.

On the far end, Maelor Kalthaer was seated in a chair of pure white, on top of the chair, far higher than his head was a phoenix carved carefully, showing his family's banner.

Next to him was an empty seat.

A chair decorated with black feather, with a Raven carved on top of its header, the Black Raven house had a seat waiting for its most worthy candidate, prince Caerion Rhaevan.

On the other side of the White Phoenix seat, another prince was seated in a chair of brown and white, decorated with a brown hawk carved of wood.

Prince Vaedran Hawkryn represented his house, busy discussing terms with a team of three experts that sat right behind him.

He was analyzing the researches his team provided for him to strengthen his position.

Next to him, an older prince was seated in a red chair with a header of an owl.

Prince Elyran Otharyn was the oldest prince in the room.

He had grey long hair and a short beard that was starting to accept his age as well.

On his right, prince Arveth Serath took his seat of the Green Parrot banner, taking notes of what his five advisors were telling him so that he would have a solid speech among the other more experienced princes.

He was youngest of them all, no more than twenty years passed the day he opened his eyes for the first time.

Nerukhal was amazed by the glory of the room.

And then, the Pale disk grabbed his sight, dragging it to one detail he missed.

The light fondled the waterfall of gold, until it touched a dark blue silk decorating a fragile shoulder of the most different member of the council.

Princess Seralyne Orvain was the only woman in the room.

It seemed that while the other houses focused to showcase their strongest warrior,

house Oravain decided to decorate the Blue Jay banner with their most beautiful member.

"Give it up," The voice called, "You can never impress a princess you fool!"

Nerukhal snaped out of a dream that was going on in his head.

Kalaron noticed it but he did not say a word.

"You will be cared for here." prince Caerion told Kalaron, pointing to a corner of the room while he proceeded to take his seat.

The light shied away from the corner as soon as the young prince pointed at it.

Almost as if the Pale disk was warning them of a fate of those who took this position before.

The room was quiet for a moment, so quiet, that they could hear the wind coming in through the window built of stone by the previous members of this very room, far longer a period of time than any of them could imagine.

The Tree was a monument of generations, not people.

It was the mind of Zarim, and the members were merely its servants.

Once the silence conquered the room, Nerukhal heard a strange sound coming in from underneath his boots.

A strange sound that rattled the corridors of the Tree.

"The ground is shaking," Kalaron told Nerukhal with a low voice, "Shall we move the members to a safer place?"

Once Nerukhal raised his head to ask something, he saw prince Caerion holding up the palm of his hand, a sign of holding his position.

"Stay prepared." Nerukhal told Kalaron.

Kalaron nodded and held the hilt of his sword, finger ready on the button.

While Nerukhal was shocked that none of the members were worried, the door slammed open.

Four familiar uniforms through themselves in the room.

Kalaron pulled his sword, Nerukhal was ready to cut through, but when they saw the other soldiers were in Zarim's manners, they did not push further.

"Sorry we're late on schedule your highness."

Said the soldier up front catching his breath.

Maelor Kalthaer stood up from his position.

The Pale disk decorated his white silk of clothing with a light of golden color while it listened to the prince of Zarim.

"What is the meaning of this?!" He shouted at the soldiers.

The soldiers gathered themselves and stood up straight.

"My apologies your highness." Said the one in front.

"You address to me as your majesty commander!" Young prince of Kalthaer house raised his voice again, shaking the room with its echoes.

"Yes sir." The man in the uniform next to the commander said, pulling him back.

"So long as the unanimous verdict of this council says otherwise," Spoke Maelor, "My house owns the crown crest, and i am the crowned prince of Zarim!"

The members of the council seemed upset of his words but no one dared to speak.

This was a rather odd situation for Nerukhal.

"Is it this easy to claim the crown?" The voice inside his head laughed.

Nerukhal ignored it again as always, but couldn't deny its point.

In a council that held the power to remove or add a king to the throne, all it took to hold the crown hostage was to be louder and more arrogant than the other members.

Then, prince Caerion Rhaevan raised his hand again.

Every one went silent to hear the Black Raven banner speak.

"Step forward commander Nerukhal Veyran." The prince said with a calm voice.

Nerukhal stepped closer to the Obsidian table.

Up close, The veins of white shone gold under as the Pale disk looked over its beauty.

The prince broke Nerukhal's thoughts.

"To appreciate your responsible nature," He continued, "I propose your promotion to first commander rank at once."

Nerukhal caught the frown of the soldier that was Infront of the company of four that came to the meeting late.

"I think we know who the previous commander was." The voice in his head rang.

Maelor Kalthaer was lost in his thoughts, locking eyes with the obsidian table.

Prince Elyran Otharyn raised his hand first.

"The Red Owl banner agrees with your proposal." He said with a calm voice, locking eyes with prince Caerion, "We could use a

responsible man in the position that punishes all of us in the hands of those who lack it."

Caerion nodded softly with a smile.

"The Green Parrot banner demands proof of worthiness." Arveth of house Serath spoke poliетly.

All heads turned to Nerukhal at once.

He tried to look calm, but he was not, he was crumbling inside.

The inside of his armor was soaking wet.

Then, he gave in to the voice inside his head, and repeated what it said.

"I am not worthy of this role your highness,"

He spoke, "I lack the experience and the

discipline of a commander."

The room went silent.

The Pale disk turned away from the scene,

hiding behind the clouds.

A soldier of the company stepped forward.

"Permission to speak your highness?" He

asked, his gaze not focused on a single

member but the table itself.

"Proceed." prince Caerion of house Rhaevan

spoke before any other member.

"I have seen this man train your highness," The soldier spoke, "He is talented with the sword."

"Helmet off sir Nerukhal of house Veyran." Spoke Arveth of house Serath again.

Nerukhal unwrapped his helmet in a split second, an act mastered after years of practice.

"Clean shaven face with no scars," Prince Vaedran of house Hawkryn spoke, raising concerns of the Brown Hawk banner, "Have you seen combat sir?"

"Objection," Maelor Kalthaer raised a hand, "Zarim has not been to war under my father's rule."

"Accepted," Prince Vaedran called, "My question is a matter of curiosity."

"It is my duty to prevent conflicts from happening as a soldier your highness." Nerukhal replied, "Not to participate in it."

"I have heard enough," Prince Arveth Serath spoke, "The Green Parrot banner approves."

"The White Phoenix banner approves as well." The prince of the Kalthaer house spoke, "I

chose this man to promote as a commander for a valid reason."

Then he locked eyes with prince Vaedran of house Hawkryn, "Unless you have your doubts." He continued.

"Very well then," Prince Vaedran said, "The Brown Hawk banner agrees."

All the banners agreed with Nerukhal's promotion except for one, princess Seralyne of house Orvain remained silent and her eyes were locked on the papers she had before her.

"All houses agreed princess," Prince Kalthaer said, "We await your decision."

"Every man who is responsible for the protection of the city must love this city," She said, her head still down and her eyes fixed on the papers, "Prove to me you're heart beats for this city and you will have my approval."

"How?" Nerukhal asked simply.

She fixed her eyes in his, the sight was perhaps the most beautiful Nerukhal saw in his life.

Her eyes were blue as the Sky that surrounded the Pale disk.

"That is up to you to decide, sir." She replied.

Kalaron stepped forward to speak, but before he gets a chance to, the princess silenced him.

"I want him to prove his point," She said, "Not through words, but actions."

"It is almost night time," Prince Caerion of house Rhaevan spoke, "You are dismissed until you prove princess Seralyne that you are worthy of her trust."

Nerukhal and Kalaron went out the door along with the other soldiers that were in the room.

After a while of wandering in the corridors, they finally found way to the exit of the Tree.

The Lunar decorated the city with silver light as soon as their boots stuck to the whispering metal of the floor.

The metal was cold, and the city was asleep.

Not a soul wandered around in the streets after the Pale disk tucked itself between the mountains.

The soldiers were whispering among each other, but Nerukhal was too tired to pay attention to others trying to hold him from being first commander and others defending him replacing the old commander that gave up on everything that had meaning to him long ago.

"How did i even end up a commander in the middle of a meeting to decide the next crown?" He murmured to himself.

Kalaron was close to him, he heard what he said.

"Come on," He told Nerukhal, "Yesterday i was your guest, tonight you're mine."

These words brought a smile to Nerukhal's lips.

So they walked together in the city that had nothing more important than to rest after a day of hard labor.

Every pair of hands were important in building Zarim, so every owner of a pair earned their rest.

The streets were quiet and the wind was almost cool.

The two soldiers walked together under the silver light.

Everywhere was dark, except for one house, house Rifaad was bright as the day, waiting for their bread winner to join for dinner.

A smiling face popped up as soon as they approached the door, without knocking, the door opened on its own.

"Welcome home my love," Said the woman who opened the door, "Come in."

"Lathira my love," Said Kalaron, "Meet my commander, sir Nerukhal Veyran."

As soon as Lathira wanted to speak, Nerukhal raised his hand.

"Please," He said, "You were a friend of my family last night, I am a friend of yours tonight, nothing more."

"That seemed like a command to me." Said Kalaris laughing.

Nerukhal couldn't resist, they laughed together on the threshold.

As soon as they stepped in, "Dad!" said a boy no more than five years old running toward Kalaron.

"Nerukhal, Meet my son Kalaris." Said Kalaron turning to Nerukhal while hugging his son.

Nerukhal smiled at the boy, the boy smiled back.

They shared a meal together in doors, laughter was the only sound coming from house Rifaad as always.

The Lunar smiled down on them, encouraging her children to dance for the union of two families as it watched...

Chapter Four

By the time the Pale disk rose above Zarim on the next morning, something was different.

Nerukhal and Kalaron were no longer just brothers in arms, sworn to protect Zarim.

They were now friends, Kalaron met Nerukhal's family and Nerukhal met his, and Zarim's people had believed once two people meet each other's families, they are considered friends.

So Their friendship was not a choice, but fate somehow.

The Pale disk shook Nerukhal from his bed, it was like someone kicked him off the bed.

Nerukhal woke up to the sound of the wooden floor of his house cracking.

He slept in full armor, everything was intact, even the sword was still attached to his belt.

"You don't remember anything either?" The voice in his head murmured.

Nerukhal shook his head to get rid of it, but he realized, he was still wearing the helmet too.

The voice was right, he remembered nothing of last night.

"How did i even get home?" He whispered to himself.

A knock on the door startled him, as soon as he tried to walk toward the basin to wash his face.

A rapid sharp tone, repeatedly banged on his head.

The sound was coming from the door but it was like a hammer hitting him in the head.

He couldn't take it anymore, he rushed to the door and opened it aggressively.

The handle almost broke, but it held on.

"What?!" He shouted outside as soon as the door opened.

At first he couldn't see anything, everywhere was white as snow.

Then a smile appeared on the other side of the door, then a helmet, and then an armor.

"Commander?" The face said, "Are you alright sir?"

Nerukhal frowned unintentionally, then he raised his hand above his brow to see better.

Kalaron Rifaad was on the other side, the friend.

"Oh," Nerukhal said shocked as soon as he could make a face of the figure, "Come in, Come in."

"Yes sir." Kalaron replied.

As soon as he was walking inside, Kalaron saw the mess.

The chairs were upside down, the floor was dirty and the walls were cracked.

Nerukhal lived in a living nightmare, surrounded by the isolation he chose.

Kalaron had all kinds of questions in his head, torturing him to burst out.

He was drowning in his thoughts, locking eyes with the scene he had before him.

"Happy you have a family?" Nerukhal said laughing.

"Yes, sir i am." Kalaron said with a low voice, "A woman will bring light into your house."

"I'm too old now to start a family." Said Nerukhal.

"One is never too old to found love." Replied the young soldier, removing his helmet.

The Pale disk peaked inside through the window, but it quickly pulled back after its light touched the broken table in Nerukhal's house.

Nerukhal laughed at what he saw, Kalaron couldn't resist to join the laughter.

It was almost noon when the commander and the soldier head out on duty.

"Where to commander?" Asked Kalaron as soon as Nerukhal closed the door.

"How many men does the second patrol command?" Nerukhal asked a question of his own in return.

"When i served there," Kalaron replied looking up, "There were five of us."

"Lets go find the other four then." Nerukhal said.

"Yes sir." Kalaron replied.

The two walked under the light of the only power Zarim trusted in for ages, the light was

a promise, a promise that never failed to deliver.

Slowly, every street was painted gold under the Pale disk's rule, every statue gained life, and every creature was encourage to show their worth.

Birds sang songs that they inherited from their ancestors.

The sparrows danced between the branches of trees that tasted life more than any other creature that stood on Zarim's surface now did, more than they could ever do.

Life, moved freely in Zarim.

The two walked towards the Bazar, the way was not long, yet beautiful.

But beauty is often taken for granted when it happens too often.

And that is where the world decides that the time of beauty and happiness, has come to an end.

Nerukhal was always fascinated by what he saw in the path on his way to the Bazar.

The way was covered with the oldest citizens of Zarim, they were centuries older than the Tree, maybe older than Zarim itself.

Among their branches, they hosted life.

"There they are," Kalaron spoke breaking the chain of his thoughts, "The other soldiers."

Nerukhal looked at the way Kalaron was pointing, four uniforms were sitting under a shadow in a corner of a stall.

They were not on their patrol as they should have been.

So Nerukhal walked toward them to announce his presence.

"Why are you not on your post soldier?" Nerukhal asked as he proceeded.

"Who are you to ask?" One of the soldiers replied helmet down on his eyes.

"He Nerukhal Veyran," Kalaron said gently, "The new commander of the second patrol until further notice."

The soldiers jumped as they heard the news.

"My apologies sir!" One of them shouted, "We did not see a rank on your armor!"

"On your duty soldier," Nerukhal said, "Keep an eye on the situation."

"Yes sir!" The soldier said out loud before he gathered others and faded in the crowd.

The Bazar was crawling with people that day, Nerukhal did not know the reason why.

Theran was in his stall nearby, he had a stall of grain and corn.

Nerukhal leaned on his brother's stall.

"Don't occupy the stall if you are not here to buy anything." Theran frowned.

Kalaron was shocked, looking at Nerukhal while he stared at his brother.

"You're product is garbage sir," Nerukhal replied, "Not only that i won't buy anything, i will request your stall to be closed for the wellbeing of the people!"

The two stared at each other for a long while.

The Pale disk drew a line between them.

The crowd did not know how to react to the two brothers staring each other down, they knew these brothers for years and never saw them argue with each other.

Then they both laughed, Nerukhal put his hand on Theran's shoulder while they shared a laughter.

"Did you see them looking?" Theran laughed.

"We can still do it!" Replied Nerukhal with a laughter, catching his breath

The crowd were stunned at first, but then they laughed, Kalaron shared the public act too.

Laughter flooded the entire Bazar, under the orange light of the Pale disk.

The time passed smoothly, as it did on a pleasant day.

They did not notice when the Pale disk disappeared while they were busy living the day.

Nerukhal realized the orange light got replaced with silver when he saw the street getting empty of crowd one by one.

"Very well guys," Theran said, "Time to go home to see why we work."

"I don't see a reason why you work you lonely coward!" Rang the voice inside Nerukhal's head.

Nerukhal stiffened for a moment, then he laughed so hard that his voice made the Lunar pull her dark curtains.

"What is it?" Kalaron asked.

"Oh nothing," Replied Nerukhal trying to hold his laughter, "Just the voice in my head."

"I have one of those too!" Kalaron laughed.

"I have an idea." Theran said all of a sudden.

"Yes?" Nerukhal demanded.

"Lets gather around in our house tonight and be a family again," He replied, "All of us."

"What do you say?" Nerukhal asked turning to Kalaron.

"I will agree on one condition." Spoke Kalaron.

"Which is?" Said Theran.

"That you let my house provide the food." Kalaron said, looking at the Lunar.

"Just shut up and lets go," Nerukhal murmured to Theran, "We are too tired to argue!"

Theran nodded and they all laughed.

The laughter echoed in the empty corridors of Zarim.

The city, seemed to share the laugh while the people were happy.

So the three friends went to the Rifaad house first, and after young Kalaris and Lathira joined them and headed out to house Veyran.

The streets were darker than they expected, the rain silenced the torches in the streets.

It was so dark that Nerukhal relied on his skills to find the way to Theran's house and Kalaron had his sword ready.

Bandits were reported a couple of days ago here.

But tonight, they made it home safe.

All of them gathered together, Elara

and Lathira became very good friends as soon

as they greeted each other.

Phlintar and Kalaris shared toys and games,

building their own world in the corner.

And the guys shared wine and laughter close

to the window.

They did not have much, none of them did,

but it was enough to be happy about.

The Lunar smiled down on them, it was not wealth that made people happy, it was companionship of true friends.

They barely had enough to feed to feed everyone in the room, but they shared a smile.

Then, a knock on the door rattled the house.

It was dark and they could not see anything, but they had to open the door.

So the men gathered around the door and Kalaron opened the door.

A strange figure appeared in a cloak on the other side.

The streets were crawling with people again, as if it was the morning again.

Or perhaps they were not people but a fragment of their imagination.

"What is this?" Nerukhal shouted out the door drawing his sword.

Kalaron did the same without hesitation.

"Look." The figure pointed at the Lunar.

Once they looked, they realized why the people were outside so late.

Everybody was frightened of what they saw.

Everywhere was dark, except for one detail, the Lunar was not in it's ordinary behavior.

They were shocked of what they saw.

"Nerukhal of house Veyran," The cloaked shadow spoke again, "You have my approval."

Nerukhal recognized a voice of a young woman under the cloak, he stepped forward.

"Not because i trust you," The cloaked figure spoke again, "But because Zarim needs you."

"Wait!" Nerukhal shouted as the figure ran away, fading into the crowd, shocked by what they saw above.

The flee made Nerukhal and the guys to chase the figure outside, and share the people's fear.

None of them spoke, they just looked, the Lunar shone green and yellow...

Chapter Five

The Pale disk rose over Zarim once again as promised.

Today in Zarim, everything was different.

It all happened so fast, almost over night.

Something kicked Nerukhal out of the bed again, the fall that welcomed him to the world of the living was cruel as life itself.

But little did he knew, he did not wake up to an ordinary day.

The floor was clean, the table was set, and the curtains were intact.

This was not his house.

"Do i have to do everything myself?" The voice in his head rang, "We spent the night in your brother's house you idiot!"

Nerukhal grabbed his head, something was off today, he remembered what happened last night for the first time in almost ten years.

He looked around quickly, every corner of the house, he searched everywhere.

No one was there.

It was a strange scene, he found the house so full of life empty of it for the first time in his life.

"What happened here?" He whispered to himself.

The voice in his head remained silent.

"Today is a strange day i suppose." He said waving his head.

He decided to open the door to seek what he couldn't find inside, outside.

"Sir?" A familiar voice called.

There was no image at first, everywhere was white, then it slowly turned green and blurry, and then, a face appeared.

A familiar face of a friend but very different, almost unrecognizable.

Wrinkles were visible on his skin, dark circles under his eyes, but once he looked higher, Kalaron's eyes hadn't given up, they were full of life, ready to fight back what ever was happening today.

"What happened to you?" Nerukhal asked shocked.

"I couldn't sleep all night," He replied. "I took the others to the physician."

"What?" Nerukhal shouted out of shock, "Why?"

"Everyone got sick, sir." He coughed, "Everyone."

"Why didn't you go to the physician as well?" Nerukhal said softer, "You seem sick too."

"I'm on duty sir," He replied, "I can't get sick now."

"Good man," Nerukhal responded tapping young Kalaron on the shoulder. "Come on then."

So they stepped into the city to investigate what this day had so different than others.

Zarim was horrifying today, even the Pale disk was terrified, hiding behind its curtains.

The way was foggy, the fog was almost green, or yellow, Nerukhal's vision still was blurry.

It was hard for him to see in all that fog, and what he saw, he could not believe.

The trees that hosted life for centuries in Zarim, were now no more than timber, and the birds that sang songs on the branches, were now stripped of life.

The way was covered with dead birds, all the corpses still fresh.

What ever happened, what ever this was, chose to take its first victims on the branches, not on the ground.

Nerukhal hardly found way, there was the fog, and there was the dead branched on the was.

The trees seemed to stripped of life as well, all that remained in the way was corpses.

They saw no sign of life as they walked.

"How did this happen?" Asked Kalaron coughing.

"I don't know my friend." Nerukhal replied looking around in shock.

As they walked, the city revealed more of what horrors it had been holding secret.

No one was in the Bazar, all the stalls were closed, all the curtains were drawn and all windows closed as they heard their footsteps.

The strangest part was that the patrols were no where to be found.

No other uniforms were around as long the eye could see.

Kalaron seemed to be holding on, but he was very sick as well, he could barely walk.

"Give me your belt," Said Nerukhal, "Take off the armor."

"But sir..." He replied.

"Do as i say soldier!" Nerukhal shouted.

So Kalaron was no different than an ordinary citizen after the changes applied.

No armor, no helmet, no sword or gear.

All he had on was the uniform.

He seemed to be a little more healthy now that he gave up the burden.

As if the curse was what he had to pretend to be all day every day, not what had happened.

The streets were empty as they walked forward.

But the rain from last night left some clues, there were a huge density of footsteps toward a certain way, the crowd rushed toward a specific location.

"The Physician's building," Kalaron pointed when he saw Nerukhal investigating the mud under his fingers, "They went there."

The building was tall, taller than whatever that surrounded it.

No signs, but glory, a glory that was cursed upon all day, for the way it was achieved.

The physician was known as a talented young fellow, almost as young as Kalaron, but he was far more intelligent than most.

But his intelligent was not put to use in healing people, it was employed to use the

people's conditions as his permanent source of income.

The physician was a man that knew opportunities once he saw them, and he had no means to understand anyone's situation, he worked for the well being of himself most of all.

The building made of greed and copper was visible from far away, even with the fog, it shone under the Pale disk's light.

The way to it, was through a twist of streets and corridors.

"I knew him when we were younger," Kalaron said catching his breath.

"So you are friends with him?" Nerukhal asked.

"He has no friends except for royal coins." Kalaron replied with a smile.

"You should learn from him." The voice in Nerukhal's head murmured.

The two walked under the fog that took Zarim's glory today.

The city was not holding back today, i unleashed horrors in every corner.

A shadow passed in the fog in one of the corners, another collapsed mid way to the ground, and some others wandered around like mindless beings.

What they saw, didn't look like the people of Zarim, at least what they knew of them.

As they walked toward the building built with shame and greed, they saw what had happened to the city more clearly.

A couple of steps forward, they saw the fog turning dark, it was not green ahead, it was black.

On the threshold of the physician's building, a horde of people awaited his attention.

Nerukhal looked at Kalaron, Kalaron looked back at him, the two were shocked of what they saw before them.

The people were gathered there, but no one came to help, the physician closed the doors and stayed withing the walls safely, not caring about all else but who was inside the walls.

A man stepped close to Kalaron before they go a chance to speak.

His eyes were red as blood, Nerukhal saw as soon as he found the might to lift his head.

His skin was almost yellow, and his mouth was dry.

He opened his mouth to speak to Kalaron, then his head turned toward Nerukhal slowly.

"You did this!" He shouted of the top of his lounges, pointing towards the armor he was wearing, "Why aren't you sick!?"

A mob of heads turned as soon as the man went silent.

Some where just sitting with their backs to the walls, but many were still on their feet.

Some of those stood up to see what was happening, for the others it was too late.

The fog got more dense for a moment, all they saw was darkness ahead.

They were stunned.

The darkness stared at them, they stared at the darkness.

"Get them!" A voice shouted from the behind row.

The darkness rushed to grab them, there was no point in standing.

They were their people, no matter how lost they got, neither Nerukhal nor Kalaron had the heart to pull a sword on their people.

They swore to protect them not bucher them.

So Nerukhal dropped his gear in a split second, released his armor, and signaled Kalaron to run.

The two friends ran, making way through the fog, nothing was visible.

They fully relied on their skills to find the way.

Nerukhal attached himself to a corner and moved touching the wall, he knew where this way was going.

Kalaron followed him.

But the mob were confused, poisoned and almost blinded by the fog, they had a hard time catching up to the soldiers who were trained to memorize this city.

Soon enough, Nerukhal saw a bright opening in the fog, it was the way to the Tree.

So they made way to it.

The mod was following them, the darkness was chasing to consume them.

And then, another darkness appeared in front, both ways were closed now.

Fate seemed inevitable.

But then, a horn made sound, and the darkness behind them stunned, the royal guards were ahead of them.

The cavalry offered their most precious asset up front.

Caerion Rhaevan waved the crown crest, asking the people to stop the approach.

"People of Zarim," He called trying to hide his coughs, "I understand your concerns for i share them with you as well."

He seemed unwell as soon as he managed to unwrap his helmet.

His eyes told a story, a battle was going on within that armor of his.

The prince was in bad shape, his hair was falling, his hands were already yellow, but his soul was not ready to give in.

"I sent orders to the physician along with my men," The prince called into the fog, "They will

see to it that each and everyone of you receive treatment."

"Look at him," A voice called from the heart of the fog, "He is sick like the rest of us."

"He speaks the truth!" Another shouted.

"Go back to the physician before it is too late." The prince raised his hand, "My men will show the way."

"And you commander," He coughed, "You will accompany me to the Tree."

Nerukhal nodded, Kalaron released his breath.

Two of the prince's men abandoned their horses, surrendering them to the commander and his right hand.

The horses seemed sick as well, they lost their posture as soon as the two mounted.

"What is happening?" Nerukhal asked the prince.

"We are on our way to find out commander." The prince replied.

So they made way to the Tree, to see what it held behind those stone walls covered with metal...

Chapter Six

By the time they made it to the Tree, it was almost night time.

The Pale disk was surrendering the sky to the elements that roamed the night.

The Three was not wearing the light that the Lunar provided for it, shining silver under the rule of the night.

As they said before, loyalty is not plentiful, and everything would eventually bow to power once it proves it is inevitable.

And yet, there are those that do stay loyal to the light, even in the time of darkness.

The birds hide, but they don't lose their nature, nor simply change to predators, just because the night time dictates that it is their turn to feast.

Sparrows never change into hawks, no matter how dark the night gets, or how long it lasts.

At last, they made it to the door, at night, the door shone differently.

It drowned in a shade of silver, the colors on the door, were now hollow.

Inside, the members were seated, all around the table at their places.

Prince of house Kalthaer was calmer than last time, while others were in panic.

Nerukhal looked around, for details, his skills never failed him.

Prince Arveth Serath seemed very sick under the Green Parrot banner, prince Elyran Otharyn looked a bit more healthy in the chair that the Red Owls held, but he was not strong enough to stand on his feet.

Prince Vaedran Hawkryn no longer looked like a warrior, he seemed weak and fragile.

And the princess, the only figure Nerukhal desperately searched for in her abandoned seat of the Blue Jay banner, was absent in the meeting.

She was no where to be found.

"Where is princess Seralyne Orvain?" Nerukhal asked prince Caerion in a low voice.

"She was too weak to participate in this meeting." He simply responded, shaking his head.

And while they were standing in the entrance of the High Table, a voice broke the silence.

"Have a seat gentlemen!" Maelor Kalthaer shouted.

He looked a little healthier than all the others, but still, his blood couldn't keep him safe from the curse that conquered the city entirely.

His skin was yellow and his eyes were dull.

The silver light decorated his white clothing, covered with jewlery.

It seemed like he had prepared himself for the crown crest already.

"Where are the other commanders?" Nerukhal asked him while he was pulling a chair.

"I'm afraid they were not as fortunate as you are." Maelor responded.

"What do you mean?" Nerukhal asked stunned, he held the top part of the chair and just waited.

"It means they are dead," Maelor responded calmly, "You are now the only commander."

Nerukhal was shocked of what he had heard, his hands were shaking.

"Please take a seat." Maelor Kalthaer told him, looking directly into his eyes.

His eyes looked different up close, almost as if he was not sick at all.

The members forced themselves to stay awake, during the meeting.

"We had a meeting with the council of Varuktesh today," Maelor continued, "They confirmed that the cursed clouds were a side effect of one of their experiments."

Heads turned, eyes widened and the members forgot they were ill.

"This means war!" Prince Vaedran shouted.

"Indeed!" Prince Arveth Serath lifted his head from the table looking around.

Every member confirmed it was time to go to war with Varuktesh, all except for one member.

Prince Caerion Rhaevan remained silent.

"We will set out for war first thing tomorrow then," Maelor shouted, "This will not go unpunished."

"I haven't voted yet!" Caerion said raising his hand, "Starting a war is easy when you lose nothing during one!"

"Lose nothing?!" Maelor said his eyes turning red, "Look outside! These are our people suffering!"

"The people will suffer more if you start a war!" Said Caerion.

"They will keep suffering if we do not act this instant!" Maelor shouted.

Nerukhal did not say a word, neither did Kalaron, not that they could speak here!

"I will agree to a war if you agree with my terms!" Caerion said out loud, then he coughed.

"Speak them then!" Mealor tried to match his voice.

"No recruits from the people," Caerion said, "And all the banner candidates will accompany this campaign, no matter how sick or unwell they are."

"Agreed!" Said Maelor without hesitation.

"I will prepare my men!" Said Vaedran of house Hawkryn.

The others were hesitant, but they agreed one by one.

They all had their own terms.

"I am too sick for war," Said Arveth of house Serath, "I will fund an army to accompany you!"

"Unacceptable!" Shouted Elyran of house Otharyn, "The terms are that we all will go to this war no matter what our condition!"

The room was in chaos, ever member shouted their terms, others insisted on their own.

Caerion and Maelor stared each other down from the two ends of the obsidian table.

Its surface was now in silver, covered with the veins of white, shining under the Lunar's rule.

"Silence!" Maelor stood up shouting, "We will all set sail to Varuktesh first light, we will try to negotiate but if they chose war, we fight!"

Everyone agreed with this suggestion.

The harmony curved the prince's lips.

"A word, commander" Said Caerion to Nerukhal while every one else was leaving.

"Yes?" Nerukhal stepped forward.

"Make sure no civilians are recruited tomorrow," He said coughing, "That is my only concern!"

"I will make sure of that." Nerukhal replied.

Kalaron looked lifeless, he was collapsing every step, even though he did not have armor on.

"Come on," Nerukhal turned to him, "Lets go home."

The two found their way out the Tree in no time, it was like they learned their way.

"You don't look sick at all." Kalaron said to Nerukhal coughing.

"I don't think i am." Nerukhal responded.

"You mean you have a special immunity to this?" Kalaron asked.

"I don't know my friend." Nerukhal responded.

"You should head to the physician's office," Kalaron said, "Maybe he can figure out a way to save some of the people."

"Save some of the people!" Nerukhal laughed, "He would sell my blood for more coin."

Kalaron shared the laughter, but his was shallow and weak, unlike the pervious days.

Soon enough, they reached Theran's house, but something was different.

The house was stripped of life, there were no lights inside, almost like no one was home.

Once they opened the door, they found Theran sitting in a chair in darkness.

They approached slowly, thinking he was sleeping, once they got closer, they thought worse.

"Is he..." Kalaron tried to ask.

"No," Theran answered, "Not yet."

"What happened here?" Nerukhal asked, "Where is Elara?"

"Elara is dead." Theran answered.

"What?!" Kalaron asked in shock, "Where is Lathira?!"

"Go," Nerukhal said, "Now!"

Kalaron ran home before Nerukhal said another word.

"His wife is alive," Theran said looking out the window. "Where were you?"

"The High Table meeting." Nerukhal replied.

"Is that right!" Theran said, "They are more important than being here for your family now?!"

Nerukhal remained silent.

"She asked for you in her last moments!" He continued, "She asked for you!"

"I'm sorry," Nerukhal said in a lower voice, "Tomorrow, they will pay."

"Who will pay?" Theran shouted throwing a glass on the table towards the window, "What will that change?!"

"They said it was an experiment in Veruktesh that caused this," Nerukhal said, "We set sail tomorrow."

"What?!" Theran shouted, "answer me one thing, brother."

"Yes?" Nerukhal replied.

"Is there going to be a war?" Theran asked.

"We are prepared for it." He replied.

"Let me fight." Theran said with lower voice.

"No!" Nerukhal shouted, "You have a son Theran! Who will look after him if you don't return!"

"Look at me brother!" He stepped into the light, "I have days to live, as that bastard said!"

Theran looked no more lively than a corpse, his eyes were almost red, his skin was cracked, and he lost so much weight over night that his cheek bones showed.

"Let me die with dignity! Trying to avenge what they had done to my love!" He said putting his hand on Nerukhal's shoulder.

Nerukhal remained silent.

"Besides," He continued, "If i die under the crest, Phlintar will have a better life than both of us ever did, and he has you to look after him too!"

"How do you know i will return?" Nerukhal replied.

"Don't fool yourself brother," He replied, "I have seen you fight."

Nerukhal stayed silent after he heard that.

"Say something!" Theran shouted.

Little Phlintar woke up crying, but it was almost as if he was crying for a long time, but they didn't notice him.

"Fine." Nerukhal said, looking outside the window...

Chapter Seven

The Pale disk rose over Zarim once again, a promise that never failed to deliver.

The towers were painted gold in the early light, the streets were invited to life, and the Tree was no longer of stone and iron, it was now made of gold.

But the Pale disk did not realize that Zarim had so little reason to wake up today.

The streets were so empty of life, that the light was forced to seek the crowd, and yet all it found was emptiness.

No one was outside the houses that day, no birds were left in the city, and Zarim was silent.

The Pale disk was trying to pry open the cruse, or perhaps chase it away.

But there was no motivation to do so since there was nothing to fight for that day.

So, the light fondled the dead, the towers were decorated, the streets were swept and the windows were cleaned.

But the Pale disk chose not to disturb the people that day, they were through too much in so little time.

But Zarim was not entirely lifeless.

The light touched life at last in the first route, beside the Tree, when it was trying to clean the dust of the merchant route that was used only once or twice during the past couple of years.

When the light was fixed on the only sign of life that it found, the image became more clear.

Nerukhal, Kalaron, Theran were there before the Pale disk woke up.

Three ships were prepared for the journey.

The first to the right, was a ship made light brown wood, larger than the rest.

The prow shone in a solid tone as the light touched its surface.

This was a ship prepared for the soldiers to ride in.

"Look lively men," Nerukhal shouted, "Gather everything!"

The soldiers were all in maximum gear, all in uniform, all with spears and shields, as the law called they were prepared for total war.

The Shields had the crown crest marked on them, a golden crown, on a purple background, showing Zarim's might.

By the law, the crowned prince should act as Zarim's care taker in the time of chaos.

And this, was the closest Zarim ever got chaos in years.

Zarim was not involved in a war during Vaelric Kalthaer's time.

He ruled for thirty four years, without war, without famine, and without rivals.

For some reason, he was beloved as a king and not envied or hated.

He brought enough glory to his banner that the people adored it more than the crown crest.

The White Phoenix was a banner that showed responsibility, peaceful reign and full bellies.

And that is the only priority of any of us, isn't it?

But of course, Vaelric was not apart from the rest in one particular specialty, like any other man that walked the muddy globe, he made mistakes too.

He raised the price of food, he granted the rich to buy more than one house.

But the people saw the good in what he had accomplished, for now, after all that years of pride and shame, he was no longer able to make mistakes.

A person is only granted the privilege to make mistakes as long as they draw breath.

And after they are given back to nature, they will never make mistakes, for they will never move again, to be able to go the wrong way.

And although some ways seem wrong at a time, but time will grant them a season when they shine as a masterpiece.

Every mistake will be the right choice, at a specific time.

"Shut up already!" Nerukhal frowned with his mouth closed.

He was trying to silence the voice withing him that was torturing him all day.

Nerukhal was not in a good mood today, he was leading an army to war.

His every action would have been judged by the people for decades.

At least as long as he lived, he would have been blamed for the lives that were about to be lost.

This, was no day to lecture him.

"We are ready to board the ship commander," A soldier called from a far, "Everything is set."

"Good man!" Nerukhal said, "Double check the equipment, we will not be back for some time."

Kalaron was ordered to check the supplies, they were boarded on a another ship as Caerion of house Rhaevan insisted.

This ship was also made of wood, but it had a darker tone of wood, almost as if it was more intact than the ship that was dedicated to carry the soldiers.

Almost as if they valued the food more than the soldiers.

Theran was dressed as a soldier, not to be noticed he is no more than a civilian.

Either Kalaron or Nerukhal took him on objectives, so that the others won't get a chance to be able to tell he is not one of them.

A soldier was easily told apart from a civilian, no matter how far the war was, or how close.

At that specific time, Theran was accompany to Kalaron, checking the supplies.

"This ship is more durable than any other." Theran said dragging his hand on its surface.

"Indeed," Kalaron responded, "Almost as if the highborn think they can fight an entire war by themselves if they well fed."

"The highborn never cared less about the people," Theran said, "But they will always need them."

"Yes my friend," Kalaron said, "But i have learned something in my days."

"Which is?" Theran asked coughing.

"That the shepherd is always in charge," Kalaron said, "No matter how desperately he needs the sheep."

His words echoed in the room of dark wood.

Theran had nothing to say to it, so he nodded in agreement and kept thinking about what the young soldier had told him."

Not long after, they heard horse hoofs marching outside, so they went to check it.

The six banners were dancing in the wind, behind them, there was an army of men, equipped with a gear far more advanced than the soldiers could imagine.

The soldiers had spears of lightning, but the elites had spears that could employ fire, the

soldiers had shield of wood, but the elites carried shields of metal, decorated with each banner, the soldiers were given metal armor, but the elites wore something far more sophisticated then they could clarify what it was made of.

"So that is why they don't care if the soldiers drown." Theran said in a lower voice.

"Well," Kalaron murmured, "The shepherd always has his dogs."

Nerukhal stepped forward as the first commander.

Prince Maelor Kalthaer carried the White Phoenix banner up front, the rest were a step back.

"Is everything ready?" He asked looking down from his horse.

"Yes sir." Nerukhal responded.

"Very good," The prince said, "Have the soldiers ready outside."

"But sir," Nerukhal said, "They are already on board."

"Do as your told commander," Maelor responded harshly, "You don't expect my

elites to carry the equipment we brought do you?"

"No sir." Nerukhal said frowning.

So he commanded the soldiers to come to shore and carry the equipment brought from the Tree.

Once the soldiers saw what they had brought, they were shocked.

Four machines were there on the ground.

They looked muddy but unused.

Almost like artillery, but much smaller than what they carried since the morning.

And yet, they were so heavy, made from metal instead of wood, they needed ten men carry.

Twenty, if they wanted comfort.

There were also a council of men and women, that did not look like medics, nor soldiers.

They wore white uniforms, and they all had grey hair, too old to be soldiers and too soft to be commanders.

"What are those?" Kalaron asked Nerukhal.

"I have no idea!" Neukhal responded.

By the time of the afternoon they were ready to sail.

The water was clear, the sky welcomed them and the weather seemed riskless.

And so, the highborn and their elites mounted their ship made of metal at last.

The ship was magnificent, unlike any other Nerukhal had seen.

Just as they were about to mount their ship, "Commander," Caerion called, "Your place is here!"

"I will ride along side my comrades, sir." Nerukhal replied almost shouting.

Caerion didn't argue further.

But Nerukhal knew why he was on this ship.

It was not like any man would reject the safest ship with the most comfort, it was the fact that he wanted to make sure Theran was safe and unrecognized.

And even though Kalaron was on this ship, Nerukhal was not a man who could trust others with a task that was dear to him.

But in all that, something was still missing.

There was no sign of the Blue Jay banner.

And yet, the metal ship sailed without it, almost as if they did not care about their own principles.

Then, another horse approached the ships, this one, had no army behind it, only a beauty and her ten companions of wardens.

Princess Seralyne Orvain was the only member who brought medical attendants along her side.

But she was too late to board the highborn ship, they were already on water.

"Board that ship princess!" Caerion called, "The commander will keep you safe."

The princess rode to the ship without hesitation.

It was like she trusted thousands of soldiers more than hundreds of elites.

"Lets have you here princess," Kalaron said pointing at the captain's room, "No one will disturb you here."

The princess returned a smile and went on her way.

"Go to the main deck," She said to the wardens, "Make sure every soldier is cared for and healthy."

"They are not!" Nerukhal frowned trying to go to the captain's room.

"Unlike you!" The princess fired back.

"You think I'm healthy?!" Nerukhal raised his voice, "I am dying inside!"

"Commander," Kalaron said, "This room was meant for the princess to occupy."

"What!?" Nerukhal shouted, "On who's orders."

"On my demand commander," Kalaron said, "She is just a girl! you don't expect me to let her sleep in the middle of thousands of men do you?!"

It was the first time Kalaron shouted to him, so Nerukhal was shocked.

He was his commander yes, but they were also friends.

So he did not find the words to argue.

"Alright, alright fine!" He replied raising his hands. "I'll stay with my men."

"You will stay here," Kalaron pointed at another room close to the captain's room, "I will stay with the others."

Nerukhal went to see the room, and he was shocked.

This room was better than the captain's, that one was private yes but this one was glorious.

Wine, food, and cigarettes!

Everything a man needs to be amused.

"You..." He pointed at Kalaron.

"Yes this is our room," Kalaron said smiling, "And the princess won't speak a word, because she doesn't know."

"Have Theran in here," Nerukhal said, "Lets have some fun."

"We have a duty." Kalaron said.

"Cheer up lad!" Nerukhal responded, "It might be our last day!"

"I'm not afraid of dying," Kalaron said, "My wife will take care of my name."

"That, she will my friend," Nerukhal smiled, "So, come on!"

The three gathered as the ships sailed.

Drinking and laughing, perhaps for the last time.

It was almost night time.

The water is frightening at night, a might that can swallow your entire generation and still be hungry for more.

A non ending story of darkness, with no interest in light.

But the night was calm, and Nerukhal was wasted on deck, staring at the water.

And then a reflection appeared next to his, a magnificent creature with fragile shoulders and longer hair.

The princess stood right next to him on deck.

"Why are you here?" Nerukhal asked.

"Because i want your attention in something." She replied.

But something was not right, she was staggering.

"Are you drunk!?" Nerukhal almost shouted.

"Aren't you?!" She asked.

"Come on," He said grabbing her hand,

"You're going to your room!"

"No!" She said, but she followed giggling.

As soon as Nerukhal opened the door, she started fighting him to go outside again.

"No!" Nerukhal shouted, holding her arms, "It is dangerous!"

"Are you trying to guard me?" She said touching his nose.

And Nerukhal didn't know when her lips locked in his.

After they separated, Nerukhal was shocked.

"I know you want me," She whispered, "Admit it!"

"No!" Nerukhal said, "I am on duty and you are a princess!"

"So?" She asked, "It might be our last day on alive, why not grant you your wish?"

"Those are our exact words man!" The voice inside Nerukhal's head rang.

"I said no!" Nerukhal shouted, "You are a princess and i am nothing more than a soldier!"

She bit her lips, and opened the top row of her dress.

"I want you to show me how you stayed healthy while others couldn't," She said, "There is clearly something special about you."

"I'm leaving." Nerukhal said turning away.

"No you are not!" She shouted, "If you leave, i will tell the others that you molested me on this ship." She continued with a naughty smile.

Nerukhal was shocked.

"I will get what i want," She said grabbing his hand, locking her eyes into his, "Now prove to me why i rightfully chose you." She said locking her lips into his again.

Nerukhal did not resist no more, he participated.

It was the only time Nerukhal was truly happy, it was not the wine, it was fate that made him happy.

And the Lunar smiled down, seeing he is a happy man tonight, not worried about what comes next...

Chapter Eight

The Pale disk rises on the horizon, the golden light touches the water, turning it into gold.

Dragging its hand across the water, it touched a surface of wood, so it pushed it.

A hard hit to ashore threw Nerukhal to the wall of the captain's room walls.

For the first time in years, he slept peacefully, and he remembered what happened last night.

When he managed to gather himself from the ground, he found himself standing in front of a brass mirror.

"You should be ashamed of yourself!" The voice in his head laughed, "All those years, you slept with your armor and now when we need it the most, you are completely naked!"

Nerukhal turned around sharply at the bed, the princess was no where to be found.

"She probably stole your armor." The voice chuckled.

"Shut up." Nerukhal whispered grabbing his head, "When will i ever get rid of you!?"

"Never!" It responded.

But there was a small badge under the bed that caught Nerukhal's eye, it was the commander sign that the highborn gave to him.

He rushed to it, and when he grabbed it, he felt really good.

People often feel vulnerable while being naked, although a sense of freedom follows

parallelly, but liberty often matches with the savagery of the wild.

So humans tend to find ways to escape nature, as they always have.

Nerukhal managed to put on his uniform and then he stepped towards the door, acting like nothing happened last night, but he remembered exactly how it went down.

"Why wouldn't you?" The voice laughed, "She is the best you can ever get!"

Nerukhal smiled holding his head down while the Pale disk welcomed him to the deck.

Kalaron rushed towards him.

"There you are!" He said catching his breath, "Come!"

"What happened?" Nerukhal asked.

"Nothing bad," He responded, "I need your help setting camp."

The soldiers climbed out of the wooden ships, the air was cloudy and the clouds glowed in a greenish tone, with yellow veins running across.

But something odd caught Nerukhal's attention.

"The clouds are not as dark as they were in Zarim." He whispered to himslef.

"You're right," Theran touched his shoulder from behind.

When Nerukhal turned around to show his brother his true face, and at that moment, he saw that scene again.

The most beautiful woman that walked the face of earth walked behind Theran.

Princess Seralyne of house Orvain now was in a magnificent armor, holding the Blue Jay banner.

Nerukhal hugged his brother, but he could not find the words, his eyes were fixed on what the Pale disk displayed to him.

"Commander?" He heard after a moment, so he shook his head to gain his confidence.

"I will take my wardens and tend to the soldiers in need," She said, "And you will set camp."

"Yes princess," Nerukhal answered, "I will order the men to set camp now."

So they got to work, the remaining soldiers climbed down with the equipment they needed to set camp on Varuktesh's shore.

Before mid morning, the tents were set, thousands of men joined hands to bring glory back to Zarim's name for what this forsaken realm had brought upon them and their families.

The wardens' nest was set first, the soldiers and crew who felt ill retired to their care at first.

Then came time to setting up the Commander's tent, Nerukhal, Theran and Kalaron were also working with the soldiers.

But while they were setting up, they couldn't find a sign of the highborn.

They planned to set camp a couple of miles forward, and if that were the case, Nerukhal would have been able to see their banners, no matter how thick the fog, or how bad the weather.

His skills did not fail him, and when they did, he knew it was time to retire.

"Perhaps a fine castle for the warrior and the princess!" The voice rang, "Yes, yes dream on!"

Nerukhal ignored it, searching for signs of the others.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Theran asked.

"Lets go find them." Nerukhal replied.

Theran nodded.

"We are on enemy territory." Kalaron said, "It would be unwise to be on foot or in low numbers."

"Good thinking my friend." Nerukhal nodded. "Gather ten me and tell them to un board the horses from the other ship."

So Kalaron went to gather the men and go towards the dark wooden ship that set ashore next to theirs.

It was almost the afternoon at the time, setting up camp was a breathtaking act, and no matter how many men joined hands, working shoulder to shoulder, the process took time and effort.

But these men were experienced in building a civilization from scratch as much as they were raw on the battlefield.

They were men of working class, their fathers were not soldiers, like they were, but every family owed one soldier to the Tree at least to survive.

The privileges of serving was so high that people could turn their lives around if they recruited but such high benefits came with the risk of not returning to the very family they sacrificed everything for.

The Pale disk watched over the men away from their families on the shore line of another realm, just because the people who lost almost nothing in a conflict decided that these men should fight other men who they never met before, yet alone be enemies with.

The wardens' nest was so occupied with ill soldiers that almost ran out of room, so men gathered their will to set up another one next to it.

The orange light fondled the helms of men looking at the pictures of their children, their wives and their parents any time they got.

"It seems being violent is more beneficial for males rather than being smart," The voice in his head whispered, "Name me one wise man who had a full belly."

Nerukhal's eyes widened, it was the first logical thing the voice ever said.

"At our final moments," It continued, "I want to be remembered as a wise man rather than an idiot."

"Isn't that all a wise man could do?" Nerukhal replied in his head not out loud.

"Fight well and we may be a wise man together," The voice said, "We owe this to our name!"

He nodded, in the middle of the most chaotic situation he had been in, Nerukhal found the most logic he had experienced in his life.

It was almost night time, the evening, the shoreline was beautiful, or perhaps it was so because he thought it was the last day he sees light.

A soldier came running.

"Commander!" He called from a far, "The princess requested your presence at the wardens' nest."

"Is there a problem lad?" Nerukhal asked grabbing his arm.

"No sir, the tent is almost stripped of men." He said, "One way or the other."

"Go rest," Nerukhal said, "We have a big day ahead of us, you delivered."

"Yes sir." The soldier saluted turning away.

So Nerukhal set foot on his way to the wardens' nest.

It was almost in the other side of the camp, so he would have found a chance to check on the men too.

By nightfall, fires were set, men gathered around them and shared laughter and memories.

"Enjoying the last night they could remain civilized i see." Said a voice from behind.

Nerukhal turned instantly, the fire light granted the shape of Kalaron's to the face.

"Why aren't you resting my friend?" Nerukhal said signing him to walk beside him.

"Trying to do the same thing." He replied.

"Then go, have sit beside the fire with the others." Nerukhal replied.

"Aren't you coming?" Theran asked from the other side joining the walk.

"Did you grow a stranger with me on the water?" Nerukhal asked looking in his eyes.

"We are brothers," He coughed, "I couldn't be a stranger with you even if i desired so."

"Then you know that i will be there!" Nerukhal laughed.

Kalaron and Theran shared the laugh and went toward the fires.

"We will wait for you!" Kalaron called a few steps into the night.

"Wait the commander is joining?!" A soldier shouted.

Theran nodded at him.

The soldiers picked up pots and pans, performing a strange and silly dance around the fire.

The scene brought smile to Nerukhal's lips, and now that the night covered it, he could stop resisting and display it for his own sake.

"Move dummy!" The voice rang.

He remembered, he had to go to the wardens' nest, but now, the walk seemed less of a chore.

Soon after, the tent showed sign of the silver light of the Lunar.

A White tent with the Blue Jay banner was set up in the other side, far from the soldiers but close to the commander's tent.

Nerukhal did not hesitate to walk in.

"You wanted to see..." He tried to speak.

"Yes." The princess cut his words.

She was in a magnificent night dress, blue as the sky, decorated with the white strings and jewelry.

The scene was so distracting that Nerukhal did not speak further as the princess approached.

"Shhhh," She said putting her finger on his lips, "I had my wardens to take care of your

soldiers all day, and now i decided i should pay you a personal attention."

"This is not right!" Nerukhal spoke, "You are a highborn and i a soldier, what do you think will be the result of this once the High Table members find out?"

"We do not know if either of us survives what awaits us tomorrow," She said in a lower voice, looking him dead in the eyes, "Now show the man i chose worthy of my choice."

But as Nerukhal approached, a sound of horns conquered the air around him.

He ran outside, thinking they have been ambushed, but he found an odd scene.

Prince Caerion Rhaevan was alone, exhausted and his armor was damaged.

His face was in mud and blood, his eyes were scanning the ground for a certain target.

"Where have you been?!" He shouted as soon as his eyes met Nerukhal's.

"Setting camp awaiting orders sir." Nerukhal replied.

"Maelor sent orders for you and your men to advance first light!" He said unmounting his horse.

"We haven't received a messenger." The princess spoke from behind, wearing her armor once again.

"Are you calling me a liar?!" He shouted.

He was furious, his anger was terrifying to the men.

"Not at all," She said, "I'm saying the orders did not come through!"

"Alright fine!" He said, "The commander on the fifth strong hold won't grant us passage, gather the men, we have to fight our way to negotiation."

Nerukhal did not approve, he showed his disagreement all he could, but what could he do?

He was just a pawn in the highborn game, like the rest of the soldiers.

So the men gathered, supplies were handed toward the front, armors were worn, and helms were tightened.

They followed the night into the battle, falling behind the Black Raven banner...

Chapter Nine

It was night time when they first set eyes on the battlefield from a far.

The cavalry march was slow and thousands of men followed the march to their end.

The way was muddy, the air was foggy and the Lunar did not do favors for them like the Pale disk would have.

Nerukhal had hard time founding his way in the dark, it was open ground but they stared into pure darkness as they marched.

The horses did not find way either, they stood still after every few steps, searching for the path.

Caerion was on the lead, the princess rode next to him and the others followed.

Nerukhal, Theran and Kalaron rode in the middle lines to make sure everyone makes it to the battle field, every man was needed according to what Caerion ordered.

"Making sure they die healthy i see," The voice inside Nerukhal's head murmured, "Perhaps you would have been a better undertaker than a commander."

Nerukhal never liked what it had to say, but he could rarely disagree with it.

The voice was right, they were walking men to their possible end, making sure they made it there to die with the most they could give to the highborn.

On the way, Theran noticed something odd.

"The trees here are far healthier than the ones in Zarim." He told Nerukhal.

"And my horse hasn't stepped on any dead birds." Added Kalaron.

Nerukhal was drowning in his thoughts already, he did not need more on his mind.

"You are right," He said, "I didn't notice this."

"I suppose whatever caused this," Theran said, "Happened in Zarim before than it happened here."

The three found something to agree upon.

Whatever the curse was, it polluted Zarim far before Varuktesh.

But the time for thinking about what caused this was almost over, it was the time to act.

"Battle stations!" Called every row.

The soldiers passed on the words as they inherited them.

Archers marched to the second row as the army expanded its wings.

Shields were set on the first row to defend them.

And on the lead, there was the cavalry.

The soldiers made way for Nerukhal to join the first row.

For the first time in ages, friends were forced to be separated from each other to fight for another man's greed.

A banner showed approaching, Nerukhal ordered the archers to stand down once he recognized its mark.

Maelor Kalthaer approached the reinforcements, with almost no mark on his armor.

"Where were you?" He called, "I was waiting all day for you!"

"They are here now." Caerion of house Rhaevan shouted.

"I meant you Caerion!" Maelor responded.

"I was here all day!" Caerion frowned.

"No time for arguments!" Maelor called, "We already lost so many good men!"

"What happened to negotiations?!" Caerion asked.

"They didn't let us do that," Maelor pointed at a stronghold across the land.

On the far end of the field stood commander Torvak Belsharuk.

A man of dignity, who worked his way up to the command of the 5th battalion of Varuktesh's military structure.

Once he saw an aggressive movement on shore, he formed a resistance in his fort, establishing a stand, not letting them pass to all he knew sacred to him.

Varuktesh had a far more advanced army than Zarim, they had better gear, larger numbers and better training.

Their soldiers were recruited since childhood, shaping them to what Zarim faced today.

A few steps forward, the horror became more clear.

The Red Owl banner fell close to the stronghold, a couple of steps back was the remains of the Green Parrot banner.

The remaining men of the two banners held their ground with Vaedran of house Hawkryn holding the Brown Hawk banner.

The stand was barely holding, so the reinforcements pushed forward.

The ground was covered with bodies of both sides.

The elites that were brought to do the highborn bidding were not a match for the

dedication of the men they found in front of them.

"Perhaps it was their arrogance that granted them this fate." The voice in Nerukhal whispered to him.

"Perhaps." He whispered to himself.

But the events did not go according to strategic plans of Maelor.

The opposing army did not retreat once they saw the reinforcements, they pushed.

Maelor was trained to face the most sophisticated military puzzles of their time, in this, he saw a pattern that he knew well.

So he claimed the archers' command and stood in front of them.

"Archer!" He called.

The men responded with a harsh roar.

"Pull." He brought his arm up.

"Are you out of your mind!?" Caerion asked, "Those are our men out there!", pushing Maelor's arm away.

"A risk we should take," He said pushing him away to raise his hand again.

"Loose!" He called after a moment.

The sky was already dark, so no one suspected the rain of arrows.

So the opposing army lost so many men, but the results were the same for the Zarim's army as well.

But friendly casualties were no where close to what the opposing side indured.

Prince Vaedran of house Hawkryn was severely wounded, but he was too stubborn to give up.

"Charge!" Maelor called.

The roar nearly took the gift of hearing from Nerukhal, he just followed the rest into the battle.

Little did they know, the opposing side had their own tricks.

Once the two sides clashed, the morning came.

But It was not the Pale disk that brought it, it was a flood of flaming arrows, originated in Belsharuk's stronghold.

A shield hit Nerukhal in the head while he was distracted, knocking him off his horse.

The horse ran away as soon as it saw no obstacles, leaving Nerukhal in the dirt.

The soldier responsible for this achievement raised his spear to end Nerukhal.

He had no weapons to defend so he closed his eyes, sure of his end.

"This is the end then..." The voice whispered in his head.

And then a warm substance splashed across his face waking him up.

When he opened his eyes he found Theran driving his sword in the soldier's chest.

"Perhaps not." The voice in his head whispered again.

"Get up brother," Theran grabbed his hand, "We have a lot to do."

Nerukhal nodded and got back to the battle.

On the other side, Caerion was surrounded, helping Vaedran evacuate.

Then came Maelor with his army of elites, they whipped the opposing side out with a tide of spears and swords.

Vaedran's body was too weak to keep fighting no matter how strong his mind was.

The two brothers had their hands full with the right wing as Maelor and Vaedran pushed in the left wing once they saw an opening.

An arrow came blocked Nerukhal's vision with its flame, he dodged in time.

"You still got it brother!" Theran called.

But when Nerukhal turned to answer his brother, Theran collapsed.

The arrow went right in his chest, where his armor was weakest.

"No!" Nerukhal shouted, leaving his sword and shield to run to Theran.

"You will be alright brother," Nerkhal held him, "Medic!" He shouted.

"Look at me," He whispered, "I came here for this, remember."

"Shut up and stay awake!" Nerukhal shouted,

"Medic!" He called again.

"Take care of Phlintar." Theran slapped him before shutting his eyes.

"No!" Nerukhal screamed to the air.

"Its time." The voice in his head said.

Then Nerukhal grabbed the only thing he could find on the ground, removed his helmet and ran toward the remains of the opposing army.

He drew the shape of the sword on five bodies as he ran, the soldiers dropped to their knees.

Then he locked eyes with another soldier, the soldier's eyes widened as he pulled his sword out of his chest.

He never knew when he pushed it through his armor, he didn't have a clue what he was doing anymore, Nerukhal's fire was fueled with rage.

Kalaron was fighting in the middle, the first clash cost him three of his fingers.

But luckily, the medics were there to aid him on stopping the bleeding.

Kalaron did not carry his shield, now that he did not had the requirements to use it no longer.

It was simply a burden.

It was not long before the right wing crashed as well, retreating to the strong hold.

But little did they know, the three prince pushed to the inner levels of the stronghold already.

So the retreating army was butchered on both ends, leaving almost no man alive.

Kalaron and Nerukhal now held ground shoulder to shoulder, they both knew what was lost, but none said a word.

Nerukhal was more experienced than Kalaron so he marched first through the open gates.

The strong hold was thin and tall, made of some sort of metal that Nerukhal never saw before.

It had a blackish tone, or perhaps, that was the night reflecting.

The remaining army was not much, but they were the elites of the opposing side, so the

task of pushing through them was not an easy one.

Vaedran of house Hawkryn pushed through most of the elites, but he was badly injured.

His eyes were half open and his face was pale.

The final stand of Belsharuk and his men lead to them being surrounded in a room on the second floor.

The locked themselves in, while Zarim planned their capture outside.

"You go in," Maelor said pointing at Vaedran, "We will go up to make sure no one else leaves this castle alive." Pointed at himself and Caerion.

"No other soldiers!" Caerion said.

"Right, right lets go." Maelor responded.

Prince Vaedran was too weak to plan the clearing, but he was also too stubborn to let go of the command.

"Commander!" He called to Nerukhal, "With me, charge!"

His siege broke the door and the men flooded inside, the clash of swords was brutal.

Humanity was no longer in that room, and fate wrote that the most unhuman would have had a chance to be human tomorrow while the others were meant to be planted in the ground to grow.

swords clanged, shields broke, armors were pierced and men fell like leaves.

At the end of the event, a stare down was set to display, Nerukhal, Kalaron, Vaedran and three other men locked eyes with commander Torvak Belsharuk and his two remaining men.

Commander Belsharuk had a weapon that did not look like a sword, or any other weapon that they knew of.

He was a tall thin man, with grey hair, not someone you would think of as a villain but another soldier obeying orders and questioning his decisions.

And at that moment, the ground shook underneath Maelor and Caerions feet.

The stronghold began to fall, so they exited with all they could gather, women and children were evacuated by Caerion while Maelor ran for dear life.

In the remains outside, Nerukhal grabbed Kalaron's arm.

"Wake up," He bashed his chest, "Wake up!"

Kalaron took a deep breath waking from the dead.

"Commander," He pointed shocked, "Your legs!"

Once Nerukhal turned around and looked down, his legs were torn off from the knees.

"I don't want to live like this!" The sound in his head called.

It was right, so Nerukhal looked around.

"What's incomplete must be no longer." He said grabbing a broken spear hear.

He aimed it at his chest and closed his eyes.

But a soft touch grabbed his arm.

"No you don't" She said.

Nerukhal opened his eyes to lock eyes with princess Seralyne Orvain and her wardens.

But before he could say a word, he fainted...

Chapter Ten

The Pale disk moved slowly on the following day.

It slowly looked over the remains of an unnecessary battle that could have been prevented, saving countless lives, with just a fraction of a wisdom.

A wisdom that Zarim's High Table lacked vividly.

The light dragged its hand on the fallen soldiers, the swords nested in the ground and

the remains of the stronghold that was home to the Belsharuks for decades, now left in ruins.

Zarim had lost a substantial number of resources in the event.

The huge casualties led to their retreat to Zarim following the advance of Varuktesh's royal army.

They were far more advanced in technology and they outnumbered the remaining warriors of Zarim on their territory.

The light stretched through the sea, grabbing the shore of Zarim.

Climbing up to gather what details it could from the outcome of what this great city suffered, it found what it most feared.

It found exactly what it was looking for, what it expected to find was before it as it touched the metal that covered the surface of Zarim.

The retreating ships brought back the very news that everyone expected, the outcome of conflict was upon Zarim.

Thousands of dead bodies that were once husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons were recovered from the battlefield.

And although all the remains were not traced, some filled their empty space on the way back.

Zarim was a widow today.

Grieving the good men and women that were victims to a war they had not desired.

Once the light found the courage to peak into the physician's office, it figured the shape of a familiar face.

Nerukhal was on one of the beds, still unconscious.

Next to him, Maelor Kalthaer sat still, no armor, no sword to his belt and no banner over his head.

So, the light rushed to wake Nerukhal up, desperate to know it he was still welcome in the world of the living.

The light dragged on his scarred face, shaking him to wake up.

Nerukhal seemed lifeless, it seemed that his legs were not the only resources he lost.

So the Pale disk hid behind the clouds, pulling the curtains on its own, afraid to know what it suspected.

Maybe it was too late for Nerukhal to wake up after all.

Maybe he had nothing left to wake up for.

"You promised your brother!" A voice shouted in his head.

His eyes widened, and he took a deep breath!

"No!" Nerukhal shouted waking up.

Maelor raised his head in shock, locking eyes in his.

"Welcome to the world of the living." He said grabbing his arm, "Happy you made it through."

Nerukhal's eyes were red, with green veins across, it seemed that something forced a dead body to live again.

His face was full of scars, so many that his eyes were the only thing that showed he was still human underneath all that bandage and tape.

"Thank you my prince," He replied turning his head toward Maelor.

"Its king now." Maelor pointed at the crown crest outside the window.

"Oh," Nerukhal replied, "Where are the others?"

"The others?" He asked.

"Prince Caerion, and the princess..." Nerukhal coughed, "Kalaron!" His eyes widened pushing himself up to sit.

"Where is Kalaron?!" He murmured.

"You really don't remember anything do you?" The young king asked calmly.

"I remember the last stand." Nerukhal said looking him dead in the eyes.

"What else?" The king asked.

"Blank." He said.

"The army that followed the fall of Belsharuk was too large for our remaining troops," He sighed, "We retreated after a battle."

The Pale disk found the courage to pull the curtains back to listen.

"The princess was wounded in the event trying to gather the dead bodies," He continued, "Caerion held the Black Raven

banner to make sure the everyone made it to the ships."

"Where is the princess now?" Nerukhal asked aggressively.

"She died on our way back." The king whispered, "The injuries she endured got the best of her."

Nerukhal looked out the window, the air was more clear now, almost no sign of the cursed clouds no longer.

But there were still signs of the curse, and they informed of others, far worse to come.

"Caerion put up a great stand but he and his men were out numbered," The young king said, "His fate was written."

"Then it seems you and i are the cursed ones," Nerukhal sighed looking out the window, "We are the only ones that were forced to stay in the world of the living."

"So it seems." The young king looked down, "But look, I brought you something."

Nerukhal's vision found a chair, with two wheels on the sides.

"They call it the wheeled chair," The king said, "I hand picked it for your sacrifice, it is an advance technology that the Tree invented for your comfort."

"Thank you." Nerukhal said disappointed looking down on what remained of his legs.

"Shall we?" He asked.

"What other choice do we have?" Nerukhal replied.

"Come on then." The king said.

Once Nerukhal mounted the chair he looked back at Maelor, he looked very ill, and almost a decade older than when they left.

"How long was i here?" Nerukhal asked shocked.

"Not long." He replied.

Then the young king Kalthaer grabbed the hilt of the chair and pushed, they found a way outside in no time.

Outside the gates, the city was in shock but alive still.

The people were outside, buying and selling goods like the old days.

Life goes on i suppose, no matter how hard the times are, people have needs after all.

They must work to provide, buy to eat, and sell to gain.

As soon as they made it out, it seemed that the war ended years ago, the sky was clear, the Bazar was crawling with people and the birds were singing in the dried branches of the remains of the the elderly members of Zarim's civilization.

"Everything seems..." Nerukhal said, "Alive."

"This is nothing compared to what i have in mind," Kalthaer said, "Come on, lets go to your friends house first."

They shifted direction to Kalaron's house.

The streets were crawling with people, and everyone waved at the king and the commander, treating them like heroes of dark times.

A turn to the right, then to the left and there it was, house Rifaad, shining in the golden light of the morning.

"Commander!" A woman called running,

"Welcome, Welcome!"

Lathira ran toward them and hugging Nerukhal.

"Come in!" She said bringing them inside.

Kalaron was sleeping in a bed, tied to some machinery.

"Aw, yes," Maelor said, "I have arranged some tech for the wellbeing of your friend too."

"Thank you your majesty." Lathira bowed.

"Kalaron is not well," She said, "But we hope for better days."

"I just wanted to know how he was doing," Nerukhal said, "I didn't want to disturb your peace."

"Wait!" A mechanic voice said, "I won't let you leave unless i thank you first."

Kalaron was half awake, but he could not fully open his eyes, or speak properly.

"How are you doing my friend?" Neukhal asked.

"Better than you!" Kalaron giggled mixed with a cough.

"Apparently." He replied.

"Go shave of that beard and come back," Kalaron replied, "We have to celebrate that we made it out that forsaken place."

"Indeed." Nerukhal said turning away, "See you tonight then."

"I sure hope so." He replied.

Nerukhal made his way to Theran's house on the chair, of course the young king still helped him reach his destination.

Once the door opened, a set of eyes fixed on him.

"Uncle?" The boy stepped into the light

asking.

The he ran with joy, hugging him.

"Uncle." He made sure...