

Inferno



A novel by Shahriyar Eghdam Shargh

• Chapter One

Morning light pours into Zarim's heart once more after eight years of hardship had passed us like it was just moments ago.

Outside, the city is alive with hope, moving with motivation and still building a better future for our children and their children after them.

Inside the fortress walls, pure darkness shines with white veins once the image shrinks.

The High Table surface glows in golden color as the pale disk shines light upon us all.

The fortress walls are no longer restricted area for the civilians.

Our doors are open to complaints, without feedback we simply have no picture of what goes on beneath our feet.

The room that once belonged to the High Table members is now crowded with a set of experts and analysts from all the corner of the city, some bring matters of politics to educate us further, some bring papers of their research in science, some bring us laboratory examples to show their growth in curing more and more diseases by the day, military veterans advise Kalaris of the flaws they see on the map giving advantage points to the

opposing armies if the day comes we have the need to guard the city against invasion.

Every sound blend with one another making it harder to harvest the details of the expert who speaks the truth to us, in the middle of the table stands a man now with grey hair and a short beard blended with white strands of hair shining gold in the light.

A curve shapes the beard of Arvenash of tahl holding the city together still acting as the steward of the city, to his left stands a man with grey long hair and a beard of pure black, holding his sword's dark red handle as he listens with sharp eyes, breathing air as if conquering it not leaving anything for others,

Sir Kalaris of house Rifaad now the
commander of the city troops stands his
ground like he never rests.

I Phlinter the counsellor, stand as Arvenash's
right hand listening to the crowd exchanging
details in every subject that is of importance
to the city.

To my Left sits the woman who brought light to
my life, Lishara daughter of once commander
Belsharuk is holding our son in her arms
listening to a council of wardens and
physicians advising her to grow as the head of
the city hospital, everything is written down
carefully in the papers to guide the city

hospital after our time comes and we are consumed by time.

To her left stands a tall man with a beard white as snow, a beard so white you can see the other side of it, dark legs glitching every time he takes a step to share new details on the maps with the one hundred miners in the city all with something new to add to the way we used to work, My uncle stands as the city's minister of work leading everyone towards a brighter future while pushing his glasses back towards his eyes shining bright green in the golden light of the pale disk.

Every day, we learn new details, new techniques to handle the problems that never

left us, new tactics to face the new ones to come.

All of us together, shoulder to shoulder for the benefit of our people.

“People,” Arvenash calls sharply echoing the room.

Silence rules as he speaks, not out of fear but curiosity of what he has to announce.

“I’m honored to have you all among us, granting depth to the city library,” He speaks, “Building it glorious as we did everything shoulder to shoulder in the past eight years that time has robbed us of.”

The crowded room remains silent.

“Have a seat around the table and we shall discuss every matter at hand.” He continues.

All the advisors choose one among them to sit around the table once they leave to continue their day in the city.

Four people remain with us in the room to discuss matters, each gathered a handful of papers covered dark blue filled with letters.

“My lords,” First man speaks, “I come before you as the orator of the new route.”

“Please proceed my friend,” Arvenash replies.

“The new route has been established for almost a decade now as you know,” The man continues. “It will be a major advantage if we

could rebuild some of the stalls and renew the granary.”

“Fine concern,” Arvenash replies, “Time takes youth from everything as we know it.”

“Yes, my lord.” The man agrees.

“We shall visit the new route to review your concerns with details as soon as we finish this meeting.” Arvenash replies.

The orator bows satisfied and leaves the room as a young woman stands, “I come before you on as the voice of the merchants of the southern routes.” She says softly.

“Please speak your concern my lady,” Arvenash replies.

“It has come to my attention last night that the merchants use outdated wagons to deliver their supplies to the bazar for sale.”

She continues, “Renewal of their tools saves the city time and the merchants effort.”

My uncle speaks before Arvenash gets a chance to, “I shall follow you to the southern routes to plan for the renewal of your wagons.” He coughs.

“Wonderful,” Arvenash says turning a smile towards the next man while my uncle and the woman leave.

“My lords,” The man speaks adjusting his glasses, “I’m afraid the technology of the machines we use for the healthcare of our

people have minor flaws in their performance.”

Arvenash nods softly.

“As you know the slightest mistake in the hospital can be fatal and every life matters for the city.” The man continues.

“As the minister of health,” Lishara speaks, “I shall see first hand that your concern is attended to.”

The man bows and leaves as Lishara follows holding our newborn close to her chest.

I can never take my eyes of the amount of beauty she carries everywhere she goes, she smiles at me as she walks toward the door.

“My lords,” an old man cuts the moment, “The open end in the mines concerns the veterans of the city as we speak, an entrance to the city poorly guarded can be a major mistake if greed finds way to it.” He grunts as he locks his eyes on Kalaris.

“I shall see to it that this entrance is sealed if necessary whether with rocks or men.”

Kalaris adds standing up.

Arvenash and I aim for the door as they leave since our presence is more required in the city than an empty room of silence.

“All this wouldn’t have been possible if it weren’t for you my friend,” Arvenash says politely.

“We all do our part for a better city,” I replied,
“Every member of our team has an equal
share in what we have accomplished.”

“Shall we,” Arvenash nods.

We walk through open doors towards a city
full of life.

No guards at the doors, no gates to guard the
fortress from fear, we walk outside as the
people are welcome inside.

A faint smile runs through the everyone that
sees us walking among them, they haven't
grown accustomed to seeing the members of
the fortress walking freely in the city no
matter how many years pass those haunting

days of the kings who walked this land before us.

Unlike the royalty, we are also citizens of this city beyond our uniforms and badges.

They are only a sign that we serve the city not a symbol that divides us from the ordinary lives that play the vital role in running the city.

Without working hands, all else is meaningless as time has showed us.

No amount of coin can build a civilization if it isn't for the men and women who sweat under the pale disk to gather the bricks to assemble them into glory.

The metal birds now move sparsely in the city, not to spy on the people but to serve their needs saving them time.

We opened the gates of technology to the city along with the gates of the fortress a few years back, people can now afford all that was once a myth to them.

The metal birds now sever as messengers between the people, they deliver packages of food to the ones in need or the ones that paid in coin for their household, they deliver messages to every corner of the city faster than any horse could ever run the land making things both easier and faster simultaneously.

We walk past the bazar on foot to witness the mechanical giants that help the people build new stalls of pure metal instead of wood and stone to last longer than ever in the heart of the city.

Everything breathes in a new era as we stayed true to our heritage, we still sign and read on paper, we still read books more than we use the glowing boards to amuse our boredom with the colors they possess within their limited territory.

Fresh air has roamed in the city once we moved all harmful machinery of the past to a museum located in the heart of the city for all to witness the mistakes of the past and to

learn from them for a better future, it has accrued to me that a the next day cannot be any brighter than the past if we are to remain a prisoner within the walls of the knowledge of yesterday.

A boy runs to us calling “Steward!” He says frigidly, “A scary man has interrupted us while we played in the streets.”

We share a laughter together Arvenash and I, “I learned from a wise friend of mine that nothing is truly scary once you understand it’s purpose, young man.” He says dragging his hand through the boy’s hair smiling to me.

“Come,” I say to the boy taking his hand, “Let’s meet this scary friend of yours.”

“He is not our friend!” He says sharply.

Arvenash laughs loosely following us.

We find an old man cursing the children with his cane saying that he is trying to rest as they played around making noises, he freezes once he sees us walking towards him.

“What seems to be the problem father?” I asked of him.

“Milord,” he says unable to bow once I interrupt him, “These children are a curse to my sleep every day.”

“Aw,” Arvenash replied, “It is not fit for a wise man such as yourself to curse our future my lord.”

“I beg your pardon, your stewardship.” He coughs.

“As for you,” I turn to the children, “It is the duty of a civilization to take care of their elderly.”

“Yes, milord.” They say simultaneously with their soft voices as they look up at me.

“Give our friend his rest time until the mid morning and resume your games after that.” Arvenash says politely to the children.

“Thank you, milords.” The old man smiles.

“Please do not interrupt the children’s playtime after you’re well rested father,” I said

putting my hand on his shoulder, “It is how they learn this life.”

“Of course.” The old man replies.

We resume our walk around the city as Kalaris joins the team to walk beside us.

“The path under the mines is sealed with rocks as there is no necessity for it to see light in order to keep going.” He reports, not with a salute but as our friend.

“Well done,” Arvenash replies looking down.

Lishara joins a few moments later with news of the new machines being transported to the hospital for the healthcare of the people.

“The new devices will be open for service by the evening.” She says holding our baby.

“Excellent my love.” I replied putting my hand on the baby’s head to feel his presence.

Lishara answers with a smile so beautiful that the pale disk shies away from us for a moment.

My uncle joins the walk calmly before we notice, “The old wagons run by horses in the southern have been improved by machine based wagons saving them time and the horses rest. He speaks.

“Your solutions stand tall as always commander,” Kalaris replies.

We walk toward the new route as the evening settles in Zarim showing the beauty of the color orange as it paints the towers and the buildings of the city.

Everyone follows one step behind us to hear the steward speak in the new route announcing the changes applied in the city and those planned for the days to come.

The people have set the stage ready for Arvenash to speak standing visible to all the people who gather around him.

Everyone cheers as the newly arrived boats put their supplies on solid ground to join the speech.

As we pour towards the beach, a shadowy figure catches my eye.

A young man with king kalthaers banner on his belt wrapped in a cloak leaving the area as the people set place.

“It’s the stable boy,” the voice in my head lingers, “Let him be.”

The people gather around the stage to hear Arvenash speak as a tradition that has been going on a few years back, announcing our achievements in the day while planning the future.

In this event, every citizen is allowed to ask questions or state their concerns to the steward.

Today, the event feels different than the rest in some way.

Something deep inside my mind is worried that this day will not end as it should.

Arvenash climbs on the stage as he waves to the cheering people standing steps away from the stage to hear him speak.

It was at that moment that time slowed down, the ground rejected my footsteps while the stage roared an unbearable sound to my ears.

The people in the front row were sent back as I witnessed Arvenash tossed aside by the sudden light that dominated the docks that day.

I ran towards Lishara as the event took place while my uncle and Kalaris ran towards what remained of the stage.

Lishara was curled around the baby once I reached her to experience a moment of relief, they were both unharmed but covered with sand and dirt as I was.

We moved as fast as we could towards my uncle and Kalaris to collect Arvenash and as a team again we could manage the event and calm the people and resume what was left of the day.

And under the silver light we witnessed what was perhaps the most terrifying scene of that the day held secret.

Arvenash was pinned to the footer of the mountain that backed him in his speech, an arm and a leg was torn off of his torso while the rest barely held intact, unconscious but still fighting to breath through the wooden spear fixed between his ribs.

The people panicked once they witnessed how terrorizing a day could become in a matter of moments but still, they helped us gather the wounded and rush to the hospital.

On a hill close by that day, the birds held their breaths silently, only watching us from above.

The hospital that was stripped of people that day grew crawling with the injured of the

event, so many wounded that there was hardly space for all of them at once.

What was remained of Arvenash was escorted to an emergency room for care under Lishara's direct vision to insure he survives the night.

All the people helped the injured in a unique unity that was hardly ever witnessed in the city but required in such times of need.

Men and women of the city sat on the bedsides of their loved ones once the city drowned in the night.

I stepped outside to catch some fresh air, once I looked up, the lunar silver was hiding behind a tide of black cloud in the air.

The sky started grieving with a harsh roar of thunder, a heavy rain flooded the city moments after we heard the roar high above.

the incomplete team stripped of Arvenash left for our residence once everyone was tucked in under the care of the wardens and the herb hands, they wanted no visitors to remain focused.

Lishara carried our baby home to shake of the events of that day with me, Kalaris and my uncle.

The doorstep was wet as was the rest of the city once we reached our destination.

No one dared to speak first so we went to bed
silent to wait for a better day that fate saw fit
for the city.

The night continued to cry as we went to bed
that night.

The streets pouring with tears as the sky
sobbed in sadness of what it just witnessed...

• Chapter Two

The morning light crept over the docks like a thief, revealing the scars of yesterday's blast. Smoke still rose from the shattered wood, curling into the air like whispers of a warning we had failed to hear.

The pale disk peeked through windows to check on us after the accident shook our hearts.

I sit up after I hear the explosion in my ears again, the sound waked me from a deep sleep forcing me to remember what the city suffered yesterday.

Lishara sleeps holding our baby tight between her arms as if the explosion might come back to take him away from us once again.

My uncle holds his rusty sword between his mechanical knees as if he can fight the explosion back if it came bursting through the door, he is still wearing his glasses sleeping seated.

Perhaps a habit that has been formed over the years of sleeping in a wheel chair, It's nearly impossible to kick.

I stood up silently, careful not to wake anyone up since it was very early.

The rain had settled into every crack of the stone, leaving the streets dark and heavy, as if the city itself had not yet risen from the night.

I stepped outside to face the day.

The streets of Zarim shined dark grey under the pale light, mirroring the city into the ground as if they tried to save an image of it before things get any worse than what they had become now.

I started walking toward the docks to examine where it all happened;

The city was oddly quiet this morning under the pale light of the disk hiding behind the clouds in the sky perhaps too afraid to look down on our fate.

A bird sat among the branches of a tree
soaking wet and unable to sing, it only tried to
survive for a better day to come.

The stalls were closed and the bazar was
stripped of the crowd, not a soul was out that
morning.

The haunted city guided me through the
mountains to the docks in the new route.

At the docks I finally realized It was not a
nightmare, I was wide awake unless Kalaris
found a way into my dreams.

At the docks only steps from the stage, the
wind fondled Kalaris's grey hair between its
fingers.

He was standing there with his arms crossed watching the sight carefully alone in the docks.

No soldiers were around and he wasn't wearing his armor or his uniform.

A white silk covered his torso like any other civilian in the city.

“Good to see a familiar face,” He said almost to himself once he saw me getting close.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“Where else should I be?” He murmured lighting his cigarette.

“Did you come to investigate the scene?” I asked of him softly.

“Does it change the past?” He replied
smoking.

“Nothing can change the past.” I replied.

He looked at me with a faint smile offering a
cigarette, “Share my guilt?” he asked.

I picked a cigarette and lit it up to smoke with
him like the old days.

“You shouldn’t feel guilty about what
happened.” I said exhaling smoke into the
wind.

“We both know this was no accident.” He said
sharply.

“Don’t blame yourself,” I replied, “This was
nothing more than an accident.”

“See those metal bars melted?” he pointed,
“That’s caused by a highly explosive material
found in the northern routes, a controlled
spark and it paints you the picture we
witnessed last night.”

“You’re saying someone did this on purpose?”
I asked dropping the cigarette in the sand.

Kalaris nodded dropping his.

A cold breeze passed by dragging the sand
with it into our eyes.

“Whoever did this,” Kalaris whipped his eyes,
“Is no ordinary person chasing chaos.”

“How do you tell?” I whipped mine.

“The explosive material is still being tested as we speak in the fortress,” Kalaris replied, “To build weapons to protect the city.”

“Whoever did this achieved this weapon before the fortress did for another cause.” I whispered.

“To break the city’s bane.” Kalaris nodded.

We witnessed a handful of merchants walking towards us carrying their tools to start the day.

“This stays between us until we crack the riddle, Phlinter.” Kalaris whispered to me before the merchants come any closer.

I nodded and started walking with Kalaris.

“Milord,” One of the merchants said with a grumpy voice. “Any news?”

“Nothing yet,” I replied.

We walked as the merchants get ready to explore the ocean for the day.

A raven screamed into the air splitting the silence, once I looked up, I saw an army of them roaming the hills.

“They sense death.” Kalaris grunted.

“Lets go to the hospital to get some news of the living.” I replied.

We walked past the hills and the mountains towards the city center.

The little sparrow was still soaked hiding between the branches as we reached the dried tree, still unable to sing or perhaps singing didn't feel right at this time.

It was a long walk back to the city center from the new route.

The sky stopped crying but it still refused to accept what had happened last night.

“Will the city downgrade to what it was back in the old days, if Arvenash dies?” Kalaris asked.

“We are far away from those days.” I replied.

Kalaris nodded but I could see it in his eyes that he didn't believe my words.

A hawk watched a rat go by as we walked perhaps it didn't have an appetite in such times.

By the time we made it to the hospital the city was decorated by the pale light of the noon, the people were gathered there to get news of their loved ones injured inside.

They made way for us to go ahead of them and enter the building to gather the details and deliver them to the people.

Inside the doors, the injured were more than we could count but the majority suffered minor wounds comparing to what the steward has went through.

Most of them were already getting ready to go back to their families that waited outside the doors in order to grant the staff the focus they needed to care for their loved ones.

Lishara was guiding the wardens to release as many patients as they could to make room for the ones who had a more critical situation, the baby was no longer held to her chest.

“What news of the city?” Lishara asked.

“Where is our baby?” I replied with a question of my own.

“At home with your uncle.” She replied softly.

“You left a baby with a war commander?!”

Kalaris asked shocked.

“What’s the problem?” Lishara asked Kalaris.

“All a war commander knows is to take a life not to care for one.” Kalaris murmured.

“My uncle saved lives in the war Kalaris.” I answered sharply.

“Yes,” He replied, “By taking them.”

I refused to argue in this situation and turned to Lishara for Arvenash’s health report.

“Arvenash is under emergency care.” She said. “His situation is stable but nothing to be happy about.”

“How so?” I asked.

“He lost a lot of life liquid when he lost his limbs,” She said, “We lost a lot of time

wrapping what's left of his arm and leg and in that process we couldn't treat his torso wounds properly.”

“Is he going to survive?” Kalaris asked frowning.

“The chance of his recovery is low but people recovered with lower chances.” Lishara replied.

Kalaris exhaled in relief for a moment, “Then we should better head back home before the commander throws your baby out of the window.” He continued.

“Move,” I told Kalaris, “It's not the appropriate time to discomfort her.”

The people surrounded us as soon as we stepped outside the doors, “How is my husband?” a woman asked, “What about my daughter?” an old man added.

“Most of the people inside are in a good status and they are being released as we speak.” I replied holding my hands up.

“What about the steward?” A shout came from the crowd.

“He will be fine,” Kalaris replied before I do, “He is strong.”

The people opened our path letting us to leave the area, the patients came out the door one by one to their families after we departed.

On our way home the city was still empty of the crowd, the streets shined in black now under the silver lunar of the night.

The sky roared again once we reached the doorsteps of our residence.

My uncle sat the baby on the desk and he was explaining the war map to him as he looked at him confused.

“Seems like we’re just on time.” Kalaris says to me as we open the door.

“On time for what soldier?” My uncle asked him.

“On time for you to take some rest while we play some proper games.” Kalaris replied gently.

“Aw,” My uncle frowned, “So you value games more than education for the young.”

“He’s just a new born uncle,” I replied picking the baby from the desk. “It’s too soon for him to learn history.”

After a while that we spent time playing games with the baby and tried to forget what happened, Lishara opened the door exhausted.

We prepared food and gathered around to eat, after all that has gone by, we felt safer all of us at one place.

The night settled as we distracted ourselves with our surroundings, some spoke to forget, some played games and some found other ways to make it to the next morning light...

• Chapter Three

A pale light shines on my face as the disk returns to Zarim once again.

Lishara and the baby are still asleep as I wake up to start the day but my uncle is already up standing in front of the desk dragging his hand across his white beard, keeping his eyes locked on the old war map.

“Come,” He says as soon as he saw me sit up,
“You need to see this.”

I stand carefully not to wake up Lishara and the baby and walk to the desk.

“With the damaged granary,” He says pointing to the granary, “The city will run out of food and supplies fast.”

“How much supplies did we lose in the explosion?” I asked

“The papers in the fortress have the exact numbers.” He murmured.

“Let’s head to the tree then.” I replied.

“Don’t talk like them.” He said grabbing his coat.

He meant the royalty, I understood right after he spoke the words.

We left the house without waking Lishara and the baby towards the city.

The way was a little more crowded than yesterday, some stalls were open and some people were standing in front of them to buy what they had to offer.

“The city is a little more alive today.” My uncle said almost to himself.

“It’s difficult to recover from what we suffered.” I replied.

A couple of merchants were on their way toward the fortress as we walked the same way.

“Are you headed for the hospital?” I asked one of them.

“No milord,” He answered, “We’re going to the fortress.”

“What for?” I asked.

“For the urgent meeting, milord.” He answered.

We walked together on our mutual path toward the fortress sharing the path, more and more merchants joined as we walked.

Metal birds flew towards the fortress as we walked too, I’m not sure why they were going back so soon.

By mid day we reached the gates of the fortress with the other merchants, there were

even more merchants standing in a line in front of the fortress.

Kalaris was there answering their questions with a rare patience.

“Oh,” He said as soon as he saw us, “There you are.”

“Why are all these people gathered here?” I asked Kalaris softly.

“Complaints.” He replied shaking his head.

“People,” I shouted.

The crowd stiffened, maybe they didn’t recognize the call coming out of my mouth instead of Arvenash’s.

“Pick your speakers and send ten orators inside with us to discuss your matters.” I said loudly enough for all to hear.

The whispers swallowed the silence after we started walking inside the gates of the fortress to take our seats in the council, one by one the orators followed us inside.

We moved through the maze drowned in golden light to the room that held the High Table.

Inside the darkness of its surface shone gold in the light coming through the newly opened window.

All the orators formed a line to discuss their matters with us as we showed ourselves ready.

“Milord,” a man spoke with a grey beard wearing a thick robe of wool, “I come before you to speak for the merchants that trade meat in the bazar.”

“Please, continue my friend.” I said softly.

“Milord, some other merchants blocked our way toward the bazar today wanting to buy our supplies for a very cheap price.” He replied.

“All merchant are free to buy and sell among their own,” I said, “But none have the right to block another’s way.”

“Yes, milord,” He replied, “But these weren’t like the rest of us.”

“How do you mean sir?” Kalaris asked.

“They wore silks of royalty milord,” The man answered, “One in dark red and the other in dark green.”

Kalaris and I traded looks for a moment in silence before any of us answered the merchant.

Another man broke the silence, “One woman blocked our way with a couple of mercenaries in the southern routes too.”

“Was she a normal merchant?” I asked.

“No milord,” The man replied, “We don’t have female merchants in our communities.”

“So this woman was a bandit?” Kalaris asked.

“She was too well dressed for a bandit,” the man replied, “She wore a dark and grey silk with purely golden hair.”

Kalaris shifted from his seat for a moment after he heard the man speak.

“How did she block your way sir?” I asked.

“Her mercenaries covered the road milord,” he replied with an innocent tone, “You either sell your ink to me she said or I’ll order these men to take it anyway.”

My uncle raised his head as he was analyzing the granary stock papers, “What is the meaning of this?!” He asked me.

Another man raised his voice among the crowd before I opened my mouth, “I am a vendor at the bazar milord,” He said with a rough voice, “Me and my neighbors found our stalls wrecked and raided as we went to open them first light.”

“Any sign of who would do such crimes?” Kalaris asked him.

“No milord,” He answered, “We would never be so unjust to deserve such behavior from the crowd.”

“I’m sure this was not the crowd sir.” Another man added, “A polite woman in dark blue approached us in our way to our stalls first light and offered gold in return for us to close our stalls forever and leave the area at once.”

“What was your response?” My uncle asked the man.

“I said I cannot put food on my families table forever no matter how much gold she offered.” He replied gently.

“Good man.” My uncle said almost to himself.

“She said my friends will not be pleased with the answer you gave me today.” The man continued.

“So, you think these people are somehow related in some sort?” I asked.

“Don’t play dumb,” the voice in my head whispered, “You know exactly who they are.”

“They must be, milord.” Another man said interrupting my thoughts.

“How do you tell, sir?” My uncle asked.

“Me and my colleagues suffered the same fate as our friend milord,” the man replied,

“Our stalls were wrecked and raided first light and all we could find in the area was a badge of white hawk on the ground.”

“A royal badge?!” Kalaris asked looking at me.

“No milord,” He answered, “It was a badge made of stone.”

Our gazes were now mixed with panic me and Kalaris knowing who did this to these people.

“Will you be so kind as to give us the room to discuss the matter?” My uncle turned to the crowd as we were unable to speak.

The men left the room bowing as I held my forehead with my hands and Kalaris was playing with his sword handle.

“Something tells me you two are hiding something.” My uncle broke the silence.

“The badge...” I tried to speak.

“Belongs to one of the previous High Table ministers.” Kalaris completed my sentence.

“And the people in the expensive silks?” My uncle asked.

“I wasn’t sure until that man mentioned the badge,” I said, “They’re the members of the previous High Table.”

“Didn’t you get rid of them?” Kalaris asked.

“We offered them each a perfect life,” I replied still holding my forehead, “Each have their own routes and their own vendors in the bazar.”

“You fool!” My uncle slammed the table, “You must destroy your enemies once you get the chance not reinforce them!”

“What different would we be if we killed them in once we got the chance?!” I asked sharply looking at him.

“Those pieces of filth didn’t deserve second chances.” Kalaris answered before my uncle got the chance.

“Agreed,” My uncle added softer, “You can never feed the greedy, they’ll always want more.”

“And once you leave a wounded bear to heal,” Kalaris added, “It will come back to hunt you down.”

“What do you suggest we do?” I asked them.

“I will take officers for their arrest first light tomorrow.” Kalaris replied.

“Why not right away?” My uncle asked him.

“Because they will hide after such crimes,” Kalaris replied, “It will be a waste of time.”

“Our work is done here,” I said, “Let’s leave this damn room at once.”

“Agreed.” My uncle said standing up.

We walked to the High Table gate silently but concerned, Kalaris was calculating the arrest while my uncle grinded his teeth on our way out of the fortress.

I hadn't even noticed how fast time slipped through our fingers until I faced the copper light of the evening greeting us outside the gates.

We walked our way to check on Arvenash's status on our way back home, the hospital was not that crowded.

Only a handful of people were at the doors as the others minded their business in the bazar or elsewhere.

Inside the hospital doors Lishara was there holding our baby.

"Arvenash is not showing any good signs if you came to check." She said once she first saw us.

“What a wonderful day!” My uncle clapped his hands.

We left the hospital walking to our home as there was nothing left for us to do there.

“I was hoping Arvenash would have the answer to the situation we faced today.”

Kalaris said.

“Why?” Lishara said walking, “What happened today.”

“Apparently Arvenash and Phlinter gave the blood sucking bastards a second chance.” My uncle replied harshly.

“Who?” Lishara asked.

“The High Table ministers made trouble for the people today as they saw our team fractured.” Kalaris responded.

“Oh” Lishara whispered softly.

We walked to our door step to get some sleep for the next day to give us a fighting chance against the worst enemies of the city, perhaps the most powerful team than ours.

Kalaris and I shared cigarettes in the balcony as the others slept.

“Don’t mind the old man,” He said exhaling,
“You did give them a punishment you saw fit for yourselves if you ever did wrong.”

I nodded looking down on the streets
drowning in darkness as we spoke passing
the smoke to the cold wind that passed by...

- **Chapter Four**

The morning light comes back to Zarim after a long night of grieving sky.

The pale disk leads an army of light to a battle with darkness, winning territory for the day.

Light crawls to our window from a far after the day conquers the darkness once more as it has for ages before we walked the muddy globe, the only battle that is promised a victory over darkness known to the living.

We are not the only creatures to recognize it, the sparrows sing to welcome it, the roosters cry to give news of the victory and the hawks fly high to gather details of the casualties of this evergoing battle.

I wake up with a knock but I don't have enough motivation to sit up just yet, I just peak around to see what my surroundings.

Kalaris walks in guided by the first light.

He looks a little bit older day by day since accident shattered our string of achievements, we have not moved forward ever since, we just struggled not to go back.

“Wake up already!” My uncle shouted in the room suddenly.

Lishara shivered in my arms as his voice echoed in the room, our baby started crying as soon as he opened his eyes.

She picked up the baby immediately and gave my uncle a harsh look.

I stood up as fast as I could shaking the sleep and grabbing my coat to leave the house.

We walked out the door as Lishara stayed inside with our baby.

The pale light shines on my face when we set step on the stairs outside, the light is a void combined with bits of golden beams.

“Let’s start the day with going to the fortress,” Kalaris said, “We need to gather officers to

arrest these unfixable excuses for the mankind.”

“Agreed.” My uncle said sliding his glasses closer to his eyes as we walked.

“We also need horses,” I told my uncle. “We can get them on our way to the fortress.”

“No need for that,” Kalaris replied patiently, “The soldiers have mounted horses in the fortress, ready to ride.

We walked under the pale light of the mid morning, today was like any other that passed us in the last week.

The stalls are half open, some wrecked, some raided.

The crowd is sparse in the bazar today.

The numbers are even lower than yesterday.

We walk past the quiet place as there is nothing of interest here to catch our attention, the people buy and leave as fast as they could not even noticing us pass by like they did before, no one even approached to speak to us.

To reach the fortress we walked a path of solitude, not even any birds nearby to watch us approach the open gates.

Inside, a handful of soldiers are gathering their supplies to accompany us in our task to bring the former ministers to justice.

The horses are fully ready with full bellies ready to charge into the battlefield, the day before them is nothing compared to their preparations.

We each mount a horse and start to ride with our fellow soldiers, all geared up and ready to act when the commander calls.

“Let’s move gentlemen,” I said, “We have an important day ahead of us.”

Kalaris nods as he deploys a soft blow to the animal’s belly.

My uncle pats an area behind its ear to make the horse walk.

The way of the old soldier comes with years of training to master.

I ride a black horse with a dark brown leather saddle on its back.

My uncle picked a brown horse with a white area between its eyes and Kalaris chose a white horse with white hair decorating its neck waving in the wind.

The animals lead us to the outside as the fortress gates remain open for all behind us, the soldiers follow on their own horses carrying all they need for a full battle if the situation requires it.

In total we were six men riding towards the call of justice.

Our journey begins with the first route that belonged to the blue jay house hold, a trail leading to a soft river rich with gold.

A retirement we saw fit to retire the first minister that agreed to abdicate the High Table, perhaps the most noble of the members.

The trail came with wonders, a handful of peacocks gathered around the river to get a drink of fresh water as we passed by, the way was flat and seemed effortless for our mighty war horses to walk.

A miraculous palace zoomed in our sight every step the horses took forward.

Decorated with flat white marbles it shone under the golden light as the blue jay banner stood tall on its side stretching close to the opening door.

The isolated river once packed with workers gathering bits of gold from the rich water was now deserted of population, not a soul walked the lands as we approached.

The gates were closed and no one was around to open them for us.

“Are you sure this is the place?” Kalaris asked me.

“I handed her this palace myself,” I replied, “They must be working in the river by now.”

“The palace is too clean for an abandoned location,” My uncle said, “The river is recently harvested since there are no gold bits shining on the surface.”

The soldiers agreed with the old soldier, “My lords, lets head to the other locations at once so that we could catch the other minister before they also abandon their residence.” He spoke.

I nodded and we turned around towards the mountains that lead to the other three ministers making sure we didn’t lose any more valuable time.

The mountains were stripped of trees, a set of dry hills joining together to host three side by

side monasteries that contained our next targets.

We climbed the hills in the heart of the mountains only to find three more deserted lands ahead of us.

Our horses were exhausted from the incline of this dry path.

The soldiers removed their helmets to feel the breeze.

We found the monasteries empty of life when we had their full picture, the three of them stand tall under the pale light.

First was an army of green serpentes standing firm on each other's shoulders to

form the residence of the green parrot house hold, the banner fluttered in the wind on the top dome on the roof of the enormous unity of the rare stone.

Next to that a large piece of land was occupied with a building far more beautiful than I pictured judging by the details on the map, a set of red Porphyries occupied the land beneath its skirt holding the banner of the red owl, like it existed there since the beginning of time itself.

And on the other side a majestic monastery held its ground standing firm, ready and capable of facing them both head on if there was a conflict between the three, a song of

weathered brown schists waving the banner of the brown hawk proudly calling for courage, unlike the owners of this mesmerizing statue of glory.

“The places are empty like the blue jay palace.” Kalaris said looking around.

“It’s work time for them,” I replied, “Why would they give up their benefits to abandon their place of work.”

“For a more worthy benefit perhaps,” My uncle murmured, “We all know how greedy these pieces of filth are first hand.”

We turned away to hit the road to our last hope, the black raven residence.

By the time we gave up looking for the three ministers the evening had made its way to Zarim step by step.

The horses were weary of the road, catching their breath holding their heads down disappointed of our results.

We continued our way towards the dark forest once we reached down from the hills.

The forest was haunting in the evening light, woods so stitched together that the evening light barely made through to the ground.

In the heart of the forest rests a stronghold of black onyx sending its roots down the core of the forest blending with the roots that

breathed beneath the muddy surface our eyes were limited to.

On top of the black beast that shone white under the lunar silver light, a black raven roamed freely in the wind that shook the banner it was pinned to.

All this way we measured beneath our boots to find another empty stone that occupied the land, stripped of life.

“None of them even saw these monocracies to rest for the night,” I said.

“When there is a profit,” My uncle responded, “The greedy starve themselves of everything, sleep is just a joke.”

We came back empty handed under the lunar silver light to set the horses to rest and head back home.

The soldiers were empty of the will to move a muscle once we returned to the fortress, one of them fell off the horse and went to a deep sleep with his armor and gear on, the others carried him.

We walked back home as the sky cried for us and the streets reflected our shame of the failure we suffered on this very day.

And owl looked me dead in the eyes with its yellow bright marbles hiding between the branches of the tree right before it mocked me and lifted off to the sky.

Inside, Lishara was there still holding the baby in her arms.

“Any news of Arvenash my love?” I asked her softly hanging my coat barely on my feet.

“I never left for the hospital today.” She spoke.

“How can the hospital function without its head physician?” My uncle asked before I got a chance.

“One of my wardens came by today,” She spoke, “She said she could cover for the day since I looked so stripped of motivation.”

We traded looks in an act of shock.

This was no ordinary event.

An apprentice taking over such major role just because the person executing this role was exhausted is nearly impossible.

We didn't speak but we all knew something was out of the ordinary.

The night settled as we stood in the balcony looking at the bright diamonds that decorated the sky, they seemed to be pinned in their place tonight.

The day they witnessed was not a day any soul could dance to...

• Chapter Five

A knock sounded upon the doors as the first light washed the darkness from the city.

The sound woke me and drove me toward the door.

I found a boy on our doorstep, bent over while clutching his knees.

“Counsellor Phlintar,” The boy managed catching his breath, “Your presence is required for in the fortress at once!”

“By whose orders?” I asked.

“They didn’t tell me sir.” The boy responded naively.

We grabbed our coats and got ready to walk to the fortress as soon as we could.

Lishara held the baby under her coat and my uncle grabbed his glasses.

I saw people coming out of streets and walking toward the fortress as we did, “Are you going to the bazar?” I asked a man that looked like a vendor.

“No milord,” He responded, “All the people of Zarim are summoned to the fortress.”

We walked to the fortress gates among the people to be informed of the reason we were summoned.

When we got close, a strange scene caught my attention, two guards at the doors with spears.

Kalaris and I stepped toward the gates, but the guards crossed their spears before us. “Citizens shall not pass.” One of them said harshly.

“I am the commander of the army.” Kalaris said flashing his badge, “And this man is the steward’s counsellor.”

“Pardon me my lord,” The guard swallowed, “Please proceed.”

The spears moved out of the way and the four of us found our way through the fortress walls

but something felt different than the other days.

I didn't have this feeling in years walking these corridors.

“Why are all the windows closed?” My uncle asked opening one of them.

Kalaris and I traded looks, remembering the last time the fortress looked this way.

The white light of the artificial lamps dominated the corridors of silence and the end of every corridor led to a pure darkness.

The High Table gates were closed and two guards held their ground at the door,

“Welcome,” One of them murmured opening the door, “The meeting awaits you.”

The words carved fear into my mind.

“Last time we hear these words...” the voice in my head whispered before I ignored it.

Inside the gates, a figure stood against the window at the end of the room while the High Table members were seated at their chairs once again.

The table of obsidian glowed gold in the light of the pale disk coming through the window the man was looking outside from.

He wore a robe of pure white silk, stitched with lines of gold, and leaned upon the window's edge.

“they’re here.” One of the members turned to his back as we approached in a state of shock.

We all traded looks shocked once the man turned to us, “There you are!” He said sharply.

“Arvenash?!” the voice in my head lingered.

I rubbed my eyes to make sure my eyes aren't playing tricks on me but no, Arvenash of tahl stood before us with a robe of white and gold silk, a mechanical leg of pure gold holding him on his feet and a mechanical arm of gold

from the elbow down, his face was full of scars and his beard was longer than before.

“No one taught you fools to bow when you come before your superiors?!” He said sharply.

We bowed unable a victim to the confusion.

“When did you recover?” I asked.

“I can never recover the fate I suffered,” Arvenash replied, “but I never felt better than this.”

“I checked on your condition two days ago,” Lishara said, “You were weeks away from total recovery.”

“Guess I am stronger than what you thought,”

He replied, “We have an announcement to make to the peasants.”

“This is not the man we know.” Kalaris whispered to me while we walked outside with Arvenash to meet the people.

We walked out the High Table doors and walked towards the fortress entrance silently.

The crowd were whispering once we walked outside, no one noticed we walked out the gates in such short notice.

“Silence!” Arvenash shouted.

The crowd turned their heads to face the scene we saw before as silence conquered

the area for a while, a man we saw torn to pieces was now in front of us.

“Look!” one of the vendors pointed at him.

“It’s the steward.”

“Do not point at me unless you’d like your finger removed!” Arvenash said sharply.

Silence claimed the crowd.

“I have an announcement to make although none of you are worthy of it.” Arvenash called.

The former High Table ministers gathered behind him as he was about to speak.

“I Have decided to claim the crown of Zarim,” He spoke loudly, “This ungrateful city never deserved a steward in the first place.”

“But...” I wanted to speak before he lifted his finger, “Do not speak unless spoken to Counsellor.” He said calmly.

A strange sense came to me once his gaze cut the wind towards me, my hands started to tremble, my heart was trying to release itself from the cage that held it in my chest.

“Those eyes,” The voice in my head murmured, “Look different.”

“Speaking of which,” He continued as he kept his eyes locked on mine, “You are dismissed of your duties permanently.”

“How dare you?” My uncle cut through the silence coughing.

“Where is Kalaris?” Arvenash asked facing the crowd as Kalaris stood right next to me ignoring my uncle completely.

“I was here all along.” Kalaris called as Arvenash turned his head.

“Aw,” Arvenash said in a softer tone, “Due to the proven unworthiness of your role commander, you shall be removed of your duties immediately.”

“Unworthiness!?” Kalaris asked as the crowd shivered.

“Yes,” Arvenash replied sharply, “Henceforth the troops will obey my direct orders since you have failed in your role as the protector of Zarim.”

“First light tomorrow,” Arvenash called to the crowd as they remained pinned to the ground, “All the technology that has been transported from the fortress shall be removed from the city, every merchant that trades without my seal shall be punished by the law.”

A wave of sound shook our boots as the crowd heard these words come out of Arvenash’s mouth but was cut short as Arvenash ordered the soldiers to prepare for their arrest.

“The High Table shall be restored at once under the kalthaer banner once more.”

Arvenash resumed, “The city requires their attention at this time of need.”

No one dared to raise a voice this time.

“That will be all for now,” Arvenash continued, trading looks with the High Table members, “You may be excused.”

The crowd left in shock as we walked among them now as ordinary citizens reviewing what we experienced in our minds.

“He has changed.” A man broke the silence.

“Indeed.” Another said. “He was not the Arvenash we knew.”

“Do you think they will take away all our hard work tomorrow?” another asked.

“I don’t think the man we know would do that,” I replied, “No matter how traumatized he is.”

“That my friend,” Kalaris said, “Is not the man we once knew.”

“He is right,” My uncle said, “No one really changes, no matter how terribly they suffer.”

“Arvenash will return to himself soon enough.” I replied.

“Don’t fool yourself son,” My uncle replied patiently, “The man we knew is long gone.”

We walked home early that day, we had enough for one day.

The sky started crying in denial of what it witnessed on our way back home, soaking us wet with its tears.

The streets were reflecting our walk of shame once again as we made our way back to our doorstep in the lunar silver light.

We walked in the doors not able to shake our confusion.

Kalaris and I shared the balcony as my uncle and Lishara sat down on a side inside to review the day we went through.

“Seeing the man, we admired fall so down into the abyss is difficult.” Kalaris broke the silence.

“Indeed.” I replied pouring wine for the both of us.

He lit a cigarette looking up at the sky, “We will find a way to get through this.” He said almost to himself exhaling smoke into the wind.

“We always do,” I said passing smoke from my lungs to the wind, “We always do.”

• Chapter Six

“Everyone is to remain in their residence and await the soldiers to approach their door”

Echoed in the city kicking me off my bed this morning instead of the morning light.

It was the fall that granted me awareness to my surrounding not the voice joined by a sound of the bell shaking Zarim.

My uncle was already awake when I opened my eyes in panic sitting behind the desk with a glass of wine in his hands, Kalaris sit facing him on the other end of the table.

Lishara woke when she heard my fall running immediately to the baby.

Oddly our baby didn't cry at all although he was forced to wake up like the rest of us before the pale disk made its way to our windows, his eyes were wide open in curiosity trying to grab the sound that echoed from the window with his fragile hands.

I held Lishara in my arms watching the pleasant scene that our baby preformed naively.

"A word, love birds?" My uncle said softly holding his head down.

We joined them at the desk to share our thoughts with what was left of the old team, a

beam of light finally brightened the cracked surface of the desk.

It seems that the pale disk was hiding behind the clouds that surrounded it in the sky, perhaps afraid of the city that it watched over from high above.

“Let’s think this through.” Kalaris said sipping wine.

“What is there to think about?” Lishara responded disappointed.

“Well, we can’t let the city fall to the old days just like that.” I replied tapping my fingers on the table.

“Exactly,” My uncle murmured, “All this effort will go to waste if we let the High Table feast on the cities flesh once more under the very man, we believed that set us free from them.”

“He never did that alone uncle,” I responded, “I made the first deal.”

A haunting sound crawled through the window, a sound of the guards seizing a stall and all those who resisted to give up their achievements.

“King’s orders,” The soldiers shouted in the city under the mid morning light, shining gold on the surface of the sea shying away from the towers.

“All tech must be returned to the fortress at one.” Grabbing a glowing board from a child’s hands.

“I refuse to believe sir Arvenash ordered you to abuse our children,” The boy’s father shouted on the soldier stepping forward.

“Arrest this man!” A soldier shouted from the back.

The soldiers grabbed the man’s arms as we watched from the window with the rest of the city.

“This must stop at once,” Kalaris shouted behind us.

The soldiers hesitated for a moment as if they heard him speak those words.

Kalaris ran out the door while the metal birds circled around his head like vultures did their prey.

“Halt at once,” Kalaris called to the soldiers leaving the house, “I served as your commander long enough to tell you are on the wrong path.”

The metal birds circled closer to Kalaris as soon as he spoke, one of the soldiers stepped forward, “Step away sir Kalaris.” He said frigidly.

“No my friend,” Kalaris said sharply, “We swore an oath to protect Zarim not to rob it of its days of glory.”

“This is what we are doing sir.” Another soldier said removing his helm.

“To protect the city is to protect its people,” Kalaris turned to him sharply, “The same people you are seizing their belongings under a self crowned king.”

“Our commander speaks the truth,” A soldier spoke from behind the line dropping his spear on the ground.”

The sound of the electric spear on the ground shook the ground beneath our feet, another dropped his spear as he heard the sound,

then another followed as another removed his helm.

The act caught the attention of the other patrols in the area.

The people came out of their homes to stand behind Kalaris as the other patrols approached the location.

In the dominant silence, “Zarim is nothing but a piece of land without its people!” A rough sound cut through the air from behind me.

Heads turned to put a face on the sound that called for resistance.

Their eyes locked on my uncle shouting from the window, A soldier dropped his sword on

the ground bowing to the old soldier as he recognized his uniform, another bent the knee to the war hero, then another and another...

It wasn't long before the crowd crawled out their homes into the city center as the metal birds flee away from the scene they witnessed from above.

“People of Zarim!” Kalaris called climbing on a rock, “Years ago we started change led by a dream in this city that invited glory into our homes and the city, we are not yet ready to give up on our dream,” Kalaris resumed with a sharp voice, “For giving up on dreams is the task of the dead!”

The crowd cheered for him loudly, as the soldiers joined one by one.

“A man can turn,” Kalaris continued, “But the crowd shall not go back to the years of darkness we all suffered under a crown.”

“Who will stand and fight for our dream?!” My uncle called from the window.

Heads turned to his direction in silence, locating the sound again then after they saw his face again, they cheered.

Soldiers lifted up their spears, others lifted their spikes and their tools, every soul in the area joined the resistant few that dared to raise a voice.

“Death to Arvenash!” A farmer called hard cutting through the air.

The crowd cheered.

Every patrol in the area gathered the crowd, first to know what’s happening and moments later they removed their banner and threw it on the ground and joined.

“No man is strong enough to hold the people back,” Kalaris called loudly, “No amount of coin matters if there are no hands to work for it.”

The crowd cheered as the pale disk tucked itself between the mountains in relief.

The copper light shone directly on the city ignoring the fortress completely, leaving it to drown in the tide of darkness.

“Tonight,” Kalaris called, “We rest.”

“Tomorrow,” He resumed, “The city fights the fortress!”

The crowd cheered as the soldiers shook the ground beneath their boots, the vendors gathered what they had to offer, the soldiers shared their weapons and plans, the farmers joined with every tool they could use as a weapon.

The city united under the lunar silver light as the fortress hid scared behind its closed doors.

The lunar silver smiled down on us
encouraging its children to dance around it,
celebrating our unity.

I nodded to Kalaris standing in the center of
the crowd, he nodded back with a smile that
shone silver under the light.

Tonight, the city prepares as he said, not a
soul sleeps tonight.

Every house prepares to fight bringing what it
has to offer to the city center.

Every man prepares to fight, every woman
prepares to heal the wounds of the survivors
and every boy of age joins the men for a
glorious fight that tomorrow promised us.

Kalaris joined me in the balcony as I held his place, Lishara passed wine with her hands trembling standing next to us, my uncle pulled out his rusty sword and tied it to his belt while the rest of the city prepared.

The patrols gathered around us to mark strategic opportunities on the map with my uncle's wisdom, the others gathered as much weapons as they possibly could, the people set torches on fire.

Tonight, the city unites to fight the tyranny of the man that once promised us clarity.

• Chapter Seven

The pale disk rose slowly from behind the mountains, its silver edge breaking the horizon like a blade drawn from a sheath. Dawn poured across the land in widening bands of light, touching the high towers and outer walls of Zarim with a cautious glow. Stone by stone, the fortress emerged from shadow, its harsh lines reclaimed from the retreating dark.

The walls seemed to wake with the morning. Each block of granite caught the first light and held it in a muted gleam, as though

remembering the vows once sworn within
their shelter.

A wind climbed from the valley below and
carried with it the scent of cold iron and
distant embers.

It stirred the banners that had hung lifeless
through the long hours of night.

Cloth whispered against stone.

In that fragile breath between night and day,
Zarim felt suspended.

The city held itself still, as if aware that once
the pale disk rose fully, something irreversible
would begin.

I had not slept.

I stood at the window long before the light found the rooftops. When the first beam crept over the eastern ridge and spilled across the streets below, I watched it conquer the darkness inch by inch. It felt less like morning and more like a summons.

My uncle's voice called for me from the council chamber.

I found him at the wide oak desk near the center of the room.

A map of the city unfurled across its surface.

Several soldiers stood around him, their armor half buckled, their faces drawn with fatigue and resolve. Charcoal marked the parchment in heavy strokes.

They barely noticed my approach, so intent were they on their debate.

“There were no metal birds when we patrolled this quarter,” one of the soldiers said, pressing a thick finger to a cluster of narrow streets. “The rooftops were clear.”

“I remember these alleys,” another replied.

“They are so tight we had to move in pairs. If cavalry attempts to pass through here, they will bottleneck.”

I leaned over the table, studying the layout I had known since childhood.

“We can set up barricades here,” I said, tracing two intersections with my finger. “And here. If their troops attempt to advance from

the southern gate, we force them into narrower lanes and divide their strength.”

Kalaris nodded once, thoughtful. “We will need checkpoints where civilians can take cover if retreat becomes necessary. No panic. Order must be preserved even if the lines break.”

“Good,” my uncle said. He tapped a section near the old riverbed. “There are abandoned ditches here, left from the war. The miners can reopen them and deepen them before dusk. If cavalry charges, they will find the ground treacherous.”

One of the younger soldiers cleared his throat. “Commander, how many men does the fortress command?”

Kalaris straightened. “Eight hundred in total. Reserves included.”

“We have four hundred trained soldiers ready to defend the people,” an older veteran said. His beard was streaked with gray, his eyes steady. “With the townsfolk willing to fight, we stand at near two thousand.”

“That gives us numbers,” I said quietly. “But their supplies are more advanced than ours. Steel, armor, provisions.”

My uncle allowed himself the faintest smile.

“The merchants arrived before first light, they brought new weapons and reinforced cuirasses. Word travels quickly when coin and freedom are at stake.”

Kalaris turned back to the map. “We will need spearmen stationed at these three points to counter cavalry.” He marked them carefully.

“Shields forward. Formation tight. No gaps.”

“I will take fifty men here,” one soldier said without hesitation.

“We will establish a checkpoint along this corridor,” another added. “If the line falters, we draw them inward and surround.”

“The miners will have the ditches prepared by dusk,” my uncle said. “They have already begun.”

As plans layered upon plans, I thought of Lishara.

She had gone before dawn to gather the wardens from the hospital, those willing to aid in the coming struggle. While we discussed routes and formations, she prepared for blood.

By mid morning the city had transformed.

Every man and woman who could lift stone or wield hammer labored shoulder to shoulder.

Barricades rose at key crossings, carts

overturned and lashed together with rope and chain.

Ditches were carved deeper into the earth, their edges reinforced with sharpened stakes. Traps were laid where enemy boots would least expect them.

The soldiers drilled the men in tight formations. The women trained the girls in support and supply, teaching them how to carry water, bind wounds, and move swiftly under pressure. Every decision we made within those walls was shared openly.

There would be no secrets among us.

Inside the fortress, Arvenash and his High Table watched from behind their marble columns.

Fear had hollowed their confidence. Half their troops had already abandoned them.

Those who remained seemed uncertain whether they would raise steel against their own kin when the hour arrived.

The door to the chamber burst open with such force that the hinges cried out.

A young boy stumbled inside, breath ragged, sweat streaking the dust upon his brow.

He collapsed to one knee before us, struggling to speak.

“Sir,” he gasped. “An army approaches the back gate of the fortress.”

Kalaris moved toward him at once. “How many did you see?”

“They stretched from the mountains to the jungle,” the boy replied, forcing the words through heaving lungs. “No banners, no marks, the largest host I have ever seen.”

A murmur rippled through the chamber.

“Mercenaries of Sahradun,” one soldier whispered.

Kalaris turned sharply. “How can you tell?”

“The former ministers had coin enough to hire blades from every forest tribe and every ship

that docked at our ports,” the soldier answered. “I saw a dozen once at their gates, I never imagined there were so many.”

Kalaris and I exchanged a look. Something colder than fear settled between us.

“Come,” Kalaris said to the boy.

“Show us.” He handed him a piece of charcoal.

The boy leaned over the map with trembling hands and drew a heavy black line behind the fortress walls, thick and unbroken.

My uncle exhaled slowly. “He has fallen far indeed, to pay for the slaughter of his own people.”

“The man we once admired is gone,” I said.

“Whatever remains wears his face.”

“That must be five hundred at least,” one of the soldiers muttered, dragging his palm across the mark.

“The boy could be mistaken,” another offered, though his voice lacked conviction.

“He is Arvenash’s messenger,” someone else said. “Perhaps he was sent to weaken our resolve.”

My uncle shook his head. “Children do not invent terror of that scale; we prepare as though the shadow he describes is real.”

“With careful calculation, we still stand a chance,” I said. “We know these streets, every turn, every hidden stair.”

“This is our city,” a soldier declared, striking his boot against the stone.

“This is our city,” another echoed.

Soon the words rose from the chamber and spilled into the streets beyond. Voices gathered and carried the declaration across rooftops and courtyards until Zarim itself seemed to answer.

By evening, the city glowed beneath a wash of copper light.

The pale disk bled against the horizon as if
foretelling what dawn would demand.

Barricades stood ready.

Ditches gaped wide. Checkpoints were
manned.

Spearmen practiced bracing against charging
targets carved in the shape of horses.

Swordsmen corrected grips and stances.

Officers passed through the ranks, refining
formations and rehearsing contingencies.

Women polished armor until it reflected the
last light of day and sharpened blades until
their edges whispered against stone.

Some men struck straw dummies with
measured precision.

Others drove them to the ground and practiced the final thrust.

A few stood unmoving as wooden horses rolled toward them, spears leveled to unseat an imagined rider.

“Not like that,” Kalaris said, adjusting one man’s stance. “Plant your feet. Let the charge break upon you.”

One by one, those capable of bearing arms gathered. Doubt lingered in their eyes, but it did not master them.

Within the fortress walls, the army of shadows roared.

Steel clashed in savage rhythm. Laughter, wild and unrestrained, drifted across the distance and crawled along my spine as I stood upon the balcony overlooking the city.

If we failed, there would be no mercy in those sounds.

“If we fail,” I began, the words tasting bitter.

“Then history will remember that we stood,” my uncle said quietly beside me. “That we chose freedom.”

“Not if they are the ones who write it,” I answered.

He rested his hand upon my shoulder. “Truth finds its way into the hearts of men, It always has.”

Kalaris stood near us, silent but resolute, his gaze fixed upon the darkening horizon.

Footsteps approached behind us.

Lishara emerged from the corridor with several wardens at her side. They carried satchels filled with herbs and linen.

“These masters of healing will tend to the wounded when the dust settles,” she said.

“You have already prepared for casualties,” I replied softly.

“We swore an oath,” she said. “All who suffer will be treated. Even those who raise steel against us.”

The moon rose high above Zarim, silver and serene, gathering the stars around her like watchful children.

Within the fortress, torches burned orange against the stone, and the laughter of mercenaries drifted like smoke into the night.

“Come,” Lishara whispered, our child cradled in her arms. “You must rest.”

I brushed her hair gently from her face and pressed a kiss to her hand, then to the crown of our baby’s head.

I held them both a moment longer than usual,
memorizing their warmth.

I lay beside them that night knowing it might
be the last time I felt their breathing in the
darkness beside me.

The night claimed Zarim at last.

The people slept with fragile hope in their
hearts, while along the walls and
watchtowers the soldiers kept vigil, eyes fixed
upon the shadows gathering beyond the
gates.

And somewhere beyond the reach of
torchlight, steel waited for morning.

• Chapter Eight

Dawn did not break gently.

It seeped into the sky like light forced through smoke.

I stood among the southern barricades as pale light washed over Zarim.

The ruined rooftops caught the light first.

Then the splintered carts.

Then the faces of the men and women beside me.

No one spoke.

We were listening.

The fortress gates opened.

The sound reached us as a grinding tremor beneath our boots, Iron dragging across stone.

They emerged in formation.

The mercenaries moved with disciplined precision, boots striking cobblestone in perfect rhythm.

Their armor was not forged in Zarim.

Darkened steel plates overlapped seamlessly from throat to knee.

Reinforced joints locked and shifted with mechanical smoothness as they advanced.

Their helms revealed nothing of the faces

within, narrow visors reflecting the morning light like empty mirrors.

Each carried a shield embedded with a faintly glowing lattice that shimmered with restrained energy. In their hands were spears tipped with charged emitters that crackled with contained lightning.

Mechanical bows rested along their forearms, compact and precise, limbs tightening and releasing with a low controlled hum.

At their belts hung short launchers built for close devastation.

They were not a Royal Guard.

But they had been equipped to erase us.

I felt the hesitation ripple through our line.

A mason beside me shifted his grip.

A dockworker swallowed hard.

Kalaris stepped forward before fear could settle.

He mounted the overturned stone trough that served as our rise.

His cloak snapped in the morning wind, dust swirled around his boots.

He drew his sword.

The sound rang bright and clean.

“People of Zarim,” he called.

His voice carried across the square, into the side streets, up toward the rooftops where lookouts waited.

“They wear armor that shines, they carry weapons that spark and, but they do not know these streets.”

He pointed his blade at the advancing ranks.

“This is our city.”

I answered first.

“This is our city.”

Others followed.

Then the cry grew until it filled the square.

“This is our city.”

The mercenaries did not slow.

Kalaris lifted his sword higher.

“People! with me! Charge!”

The roar that followed shook dust from the eaves.

We surged forward.

Cobblestones rattled beneath boots. Shields of hammered scrap and reinforced timber locked unevenly together.

Spears carved from construction poles and tipped with iron tools leveled toward the wall of dark steel.

The first impact struck like thunder.

Energy spears discharged in blinding arcs.

White light leapt from shield to shield.

The front rank convulsed beneath the shock.

I smelled burned cloth and hair.

Heard men grit their teeth rather than scream.

The second rank slammed into the
mercenaries before they could reset.

I drove forward with the left flank, shoulder to
shoulder with miners whose hands still bore
dirt from the ditches they had reopened hours
before.

My blade struck a mercenary shield and
rebounded violently as the lattice flared pale
blue.

The force pushed me back a step.

“Hook the edges,” I shouted. “Pull them apart.”

A dockworker wedged a crowbar between two shield rims.

Another brought a sledgehammer down on the reinforced seam. It cracked.

A third thrust a spear into the exposed gap beneath a raised arm.

The mercenary fell without a sound.

They could be broken.

Automatic bows hummed.

Bolts tore through shutters and split barricade planks into splinters.

One struck the stone near my head and burst
in a concussive flash that rattled my skull.

I grabbed a stunned apprentice by the collar
and dragged him behind an overturned cart.

“Stay low,” I told him. “Move when they cycle.”

Across the square Kalaris was already inside
the first rank.

He did not defend, he advanced.

An energy spear lashed toward him.

He pivoted and guided its shaft aside with the
flat of his blade, stepping inside its arc before
the mercenary could retract.

His shoulder drove into plated steel.

The impact staggered the soldier.

Kalaris' sword found the seam beneath the arm and tore free in one motion.

He turned and cut across another helm. The strike rang like iron struck on anvil.

“Forward,” he roared. “Break their line.”

We answered.

Women rushed between clashes with water skins and linen.

A girl slid beneath a fallen barricade to drag a wounded mason clear as bolts shattered crates above her.

Smoke rose where a launcher round ignited stacked timber.

“Water,” someone shouted.

Buckets moved hand to hand.

The mercenaries advanced again in
disciplined measure.

Three shields locked, two spears leveled.
mechanical bows extended above shoulders
and fired in precise rhythm.

The battle fractured outward into the arteries
of Zarim.

Narrow lanes became funnels of violence.

At the first bottleneck we executed the plan
laid across the council table the night before.

Barricades fell inward deliberately.

The mercenaries pressed forward.

The earth gave way.

Reopened mining ditches swallowed their leading rank, reinforced armor made them heavy, they fell hard onto sharpened stakes below.

Cries echoed from the trench.

“Now,” I shouted.

Stones rained down, spears thrust into joints.

Hammers crashed against visors.

In the confined ditch their advanced armor became burden rather than advantage.

“This is our city.”

The cry rose again, louder than before.

It echoed from rooftop to rooftop.

A signal flare burst overhead in a shrill white flash.

Rear units deployed grappling lines that anchored to upper windows.

Mercenaries ascended with mechanical efficiency, boots locking against stone as they climbed.

Within moments they were above us.

Bolts rained downward.

A mason beside me jerked and fell without sound.

Blood darkened the stones beneath him.

I seized a fallen shield and raised it overhead, forcing civilians beneath an archway.

“Inside,” I ordered. “Second corridor. Move.”

I turned back toward the square.

Kalaris leapt onto a collapsed cart to meet the rooftop incursion head on.

An energy spear struck him across the ribs.

The impact staggered him but he did not fall.

He severed the emitter with a brutal

downward strike and hurled the sparking

shaft into the chest of another mercenary.

Current arced violently, dropping both men in white light.

He landed hard, rolled in mud, and rose again.

Blood streaked his sleeve.

Still, he stood.

“People! with me!” he roared.

We answered again.

By midday the southern quarter burned in scattered patches.

Smoke flattened the light into copper haze.

The air tasted of ash and iron.

Something slammed into my shoulder.

Heat exploded through muscle as a bolt struck the edge of my cuirass and deflected.

The shock numbed my arm.

I staggered but remained upright.

A dockhand stood atop overturned crates,
swinging a crowbar in wide arcs.

He crushed one visor, then another, until an
energy discharge caught him in the chest and
hurled him backward into flame.

An apprentice hurled a makeshift spear that
pierced the exposed thigh of a mercenary
about to fire into fleeing children.

The bolt discharged into stone instead, the
children escaped and the apprentice did not
survive the return strike.

Every street carved memory into the day.

By late afternoon the fighting contracted
toward the courtyard before the granary.

What remained of our core gathered there.

Kalaris stood at the center, breathing hard,
sword darkened, cloak gone.

Around him fewer than a hundred of us
remained upright.

Before us rows of dark armor advanced in
measured silence.

I tried to push toward him but another wave
cut me off.

Kalaris lifted his blade once more.

“This city stands as long as we stand,” he
shouted. “With me!”

We charged.

The impact thundered through the courtyard.

He cut through the first rank, then the second.
A spear grazed his thigh. Another struck his
shoulder. He tore it free and drove forward
still.

One mercenary locked shields with him.

Another struck from the side.

A third leveled a launcher at his chest.

For a heartbeat the world narrowed.

He looked at me across the chaos.

There was no fear in his eyes.

Only resolve.

He gave me a nod.

The discharge came in a burst of searing light.

When my vision cleared, he was on his knees.

Still upright.

His sword remained planted before him,
hands wrapped around its hilt.

A final strike descended.

He fell last.

Silence followed, broken only by crackling
fire.

The mercenaries consolidated near the
fortress perimeter as dusk approached. They
had taken ground. They had broken our
defensive ring.

But they had not crushed what Kalaris had
ignited.

I crawled from beneath shattered timber near the granary wall. Blood ran down my arms. My shoulder burned with every breath.

I forced myself to move.

I carried a wounded woman to the wardens who worked without discrimination among fallen friend and foe alike. Lishara's oath endured even here.

Night crept over Zarim heavy with smoke.

I staggered through alleys I had known since childhood. Each doorway felt haunted.

I reached home long after the last flames dimmed.

I knocked once.

The door opened immediately.

My uncle stood there, blade across his palms.

Between him and Lishara, my child slept.

I crossed the threshold and collapsed into his arms.

For the first time since dawn, I allowed myself to breathe.

Outside, Zarim smoldered.

Inside, warmth remained.

And beyond the shattered southern quarter, behind reinforced walls and silent ranks of darkened steel, the mercenaries prepared for what tomorrow would demand.

• Chapter Nine

The city did not wake, it endured the light.

Dawn bled slowly across Zarim, revealing what the night had tried to soften.

Smoke clung low between buildings, drifting in gray sheets that carried the bitter scent of burned timber and scorched cloth.

Rain had fallen sometime before morning, thin and cold, and now it mingled with blood along the cobblestones.

The streets reflected the pale sky like dull red glass.

No bells rang.

No merchants called out.

No carts rolled.

Silence pressed against the ribs like a
physical weight.

I saw the fortress gate from the mouth of a
shattered alley.

They had worked through the night.

One hundred and one heads had been
mounted on reinforced spears driven deep
into the earth before the gate.

The shafts were evenly spaced, arranged so
that no face obscured another.

The city was meant to see every one of them.

Kalaris's head stood at the center.

Even in death his jaw was set, his eyes were half open as if still watching the horizon for the next advance.

Rain had washed the blood from his brow, but it had not softened his expression.

They had mounted him higher than the rest.

Below the line of spears, bodies hung from beams erected along the avenue.

Merchants, miners and dockworkers.

Those recognized as organizers were strung from trees, boots swaying slightly in the morning wind.

The mercenaries stood in disciplined ranks before their display.

Dark armor, polished shields humming faintly.
Mechanical bows resting against plated
forearms.

Energy spears crackling with quiet, restrained
violence.

They were not celebrating.

They were demonstrating control.

I forced myself not to stare too long.

If I stared, I would remember their faces as
they had been the day before.

Alive.

I moved through the alleys slowly.

Every breath scraped inside my chest.

The bolt that had struck my shoulder had left the muscle stiff and swollen.

Blood had dried in dark lines down my arms and across my face.

When I shifted too quickly, the world tilted.

They thought I was dead.

I had fallen beneath timber and bodies near the granary, In the confusion that followed, no one counted me among the living.

That mistake was the only reason I still walked.

Twice I flattened myself beneath broken carts as patrols passed.

Their boots struck stone in measured rhythm.

The faint hum of their mechanical bows vibrated through the ground before they appeared.

Their shields cast pale light across wet walls as they moved.

They inspected doors, marked homes and dragged bodies from corners.

Order through terror.

I reached my house long after the patrol had passed.

I tapped once.

The door opened immediately.

My uncle stood there, blade resting across his palms. His mechanical legs caught the light faintly.

He had cleaned his sword during the night. His eyes were sharp despite the exhaustion carved into his face.

Inside, Lishara sat near the inner wall, our child pressed tightly to her chest.

She rocked slowly, whispering something too soft for me to hear.

When she saw me, her breath caught.

“You live,” she said.

“Yes,” I answered.

I had taken only two steps inside when I heard it, boots in the outer courtyard, not passing, they were stopping.

My uncle heard it too, his grip shifted on the hilt.

A fist struck the outer gate a couple of times.

Then the battering blow landed.

The door exploded inward in a spray of splintered wood and dust, the force of it shook the walls.

Mercenaries filled the threshold.

Dark armor, shields raised, spears leveled.

Mechanical bows extending with synchronized precision.

My uncle moved before I could.

Age fell away from him in that instant.

His mechanical legs drove him forward with explosive force.

He crashed into the first mercenary before the spear could discharge.

His blade flashed upward, sliding beneath the narrow seam at the throat.

The soldier dropped.

Another thrust came from the right, my uncle pivoted, metal joints whispering as they absorbed the torque, he deflected the spear shaft and drove his elbow into plated ribs.

The mercenary staggered just long enough for steel to find the gap beneath the arm.

Sparks erupted as an energy discharge struck the wall.

“Lishara,” he shouted. “Phlintar. Take the child.”

“No uncle,” I said, stepping forward despite the fire ripping through my shoulder.

“Go now!”

There was no argument in that voice, only command.

Another mercenary fired, the bolt grazed my uncle’s shoulder and blasted a chunk of stone from the wall.

Dust filled the room but he pressed forward anyway, forcing the fight into close quarters where their mechanical bows could not fully deploy.

He fought like a man who had already chosen his end.

His mechanical legs placed him between the mercenaries and the corridor beyond.

I reached Lishara and helped her to her feet. The baby stirred but did not cry.

I wrapped my uninjured arm around her and began guiding her toward the concealed rear door hidden behind stacked grain sacks.

A mercenary broke past my uncle and
advanced toward us, launcher raised.

My uncle surged forward.

His reinforced legs propelled him in a short
violent leap that drove his shoulder into the
attacker's chest. They slammed into a
support pillar.

The launcher discharged into the ceiling,
showering the room with fragments of stone.

The pillar cracked.

My uncle rose first.

Blood ran down his side now.

He struck once more, blade sinking deep
beneath a raised visor.

Another spear found him.

This time the emitter pressed against his chest before discharging.

White light consumed the room.

The smell of burned cloth and flesh followed.

He remained standing for one impossible breath, his eyes found mine, there was no fear there.

“Protect them.” He commanded me.

His legs locked.

Then he fell.

I dragged Lishara through the hidden passage as shouts erupted behind us.

Stone dust choked the air.

The baby shifted against her chest, small fingers curling into fabric.

We emerged into the narrow rear alley just as more armored boots entered the front chamber.

I did not look back.

If I looked back, I would not leave.

We moved through the alleys, keeping to shadow, twice we pressed into recessed doorways as patrols passed, their shields cast faint glows across the wet stone, their voices echoed in clipped commands I did not recognize.

The city lay broken around us.

But it was not empty.

From shuttered windows I felt eyes watching.

From behind cracked doors I sensed breath
held in silence.

They had taken the streets.

But they could never take our memory.

My legs trembled with every step.

My vision blurred at the edges, lishara walked
beside me without complaint, though her
arms must have burned from carrying the
child for so long.

We reached the outer alleys beyond the main quarter as night began to fall again over Zarim.

Behind us smoke still rose from the southern district.

Ahead of us there was only uncertainty.

They believed they ended us.

They believed the mounted heads at the gate were proof enough.

They were wrong.

I adjusted my grip on Lishara's arm and kept walking.

The child stirred softly against her chest.

Somewhere beyond the broken quarter,
beyond the patrols and the fortress walls, the
future still existed.

Zarim had been wounded.

It had not forgotten.

And as we vanished into the deeper shadows
beyond the city's edge, I carried the weight of
every fallen face with me.

Not as grief alone, but as memory...

• Chapter Ten

The alleys were dark and broken, the city reduced to a skeleton of smoke and shattered stone. Fires still breathed in overturned crates and fallen barricades, embers pulsing faintly in the night. The smell of blood and iron clung to the walls as if it had soaked into them permanently.

Every shadow felt alive.

Every echo carried threat.

I moved ahead of Lishara, guiding her and our child through the twisting streets, blood ran warm beneath torn cloth.

Bruises tightened across my ribs, my
shoulder burned with every breath.

My muscles trembled, but my eyes remained
sharp, I scanned rooftops, broken windows,
intersections.

I knew these streets, I had walked them since
boyhood.

Tonight, they felt like a maze built to betray us.

We turned one final corner and the alley
opened into an avenue wide enough to
swallow hope whole.

A river of mercenaries filled the street.

Darkened armor reflected torchlight in cold
fragments.

Shields shimmered faintly with embedded lattice light, mechanical bows rested along reinforced forearms, humming softly like insects waiting to strike.

Electric spears crackled in steady rhythm, pale arcs dancing at their tips.

They were not even close to a royal guard but something rather colder.

There was no way forward.

No shadow deep enough to conceal us and no unseen path so I stopped.

My chest heaved, my vision narrowed then I turned to Lishara.

Her face was streaked with soot and tears.

The baby slept against her chest, unaware of the shape of the world closing around us.

My hands shook as I pulled the handbook from inside my coat.

“This book contains the city.” I whispered,
“Every secret that it holds is carved into it.”

The notes Kalaris and I had written between shared smoke and impossible plans.

I pressed it into her hands.

“You need to get them out,” I said.

My voice was ragged but steady. “Take the baby and run, remember everything we fought for all these years.”

Her eyes widened. “No, Phlinter, do not leave me.”

I forced a faint smile.

“I have to protect my family,” I said quietly.

“And you have to secure our future, now go!”

Her hands trembled and tears fell freely now.

“I will not,” she whispered.

“You will,” I answered. “I trust you, you are the city now.”

The truth of that hurt more than the wounds in my flesh.

Before she could speak again, I stepped into the open.

The mercenaries saw me immediately.

Shouts erupted, commands snapped across the avenue, shields shifted, bows lifted in synchronized motion.

I grabbed a length of broken iron from the rubble and ran straight at them.

If I could not defeat them, I could distract them.

I roared as I charged.

The first shield met my strike with a burst of light, energy crackled across metal.

A bolt tore past my ear and shattered stone behind me.

I swung again, forcing them to tighten formation around me.

I moved to cover the shadows as what's left of me survived.

Steel struck my ribs, a spear glanced off my shoulder, I drove forward anyway, reckless and furious, giving them no space to look elsewhere.

Behind me, I heard Lishara's footsteps retreating into darkness.

I did not turn.

I did not have enough courage to.

Weighted nets launched from their ranks.

One struck my chest and exploded outward in a lattice of crackling cords.

The current tore through my muscles and
dropped me to one knee.

I tried to rise as a second net wrapped my legs
then restraints locked around my wrists
before I could tear free.

I fought until my strength failed.

Until blows blurred my vision.

Until the world narrowed to torchlight and
iron.

They dragged me through streets I had once
walked freely.

Past the southern quarter, past the mounted
heads and past the place where Kalaris had
fallen.

I kept my eyes open.

I would not let them see me break.

The fortress gates opened and swallowed me whole.

Inside, a hall had been prepared.

Candles lined a long polished table.

Plates and silverware gleamed beneath flickering light, the former High Table members sat in attendance, cloaked in silk and unease, their faces were pale, restless, yet hungry.

I was thrown forward and forced to my knees.

At the head of the table stood the man who called himself king.

Tall, cold hearted and composed now.

“I knew Arvenash,” I said through blood and exhaustion. “But you are not him, I knew the men who built this city into what it was before you burned it to the ground.”

A faint smile touched his mouth.

“True,” he replied. “I am Murzano of House Kalthaer, son of King Kalthaer. I have returned to claim my birthright.”

Murmurs moved along the table.

“You replaced him,” I said. “But you can never really be that man.”

“Arvenash was weak,” Murzano answered calmly. “I was forced into servitude in his

stables, a prince reduced to mucking stalls while another wore my role as the right full heir and now I reclaim what was denied.”

He stepped closer.

“You will not join the others at the gates on a spear.”

“Not my head?” I lifted my head.

“No,” he said. “I have better plans for your head.”

The High Table leaned forward.

“You will live,” one of them said quietly, “But you will live emptied and stripped of memory.

Stripped of identity, your family will be erased,
your rebellion will mean nothing once you
obey and never remember why.”

They forced me into a metal chair fitted with
restraints.

Cold bands locked around my arms, my
chest, my temples. The machine behind it
began to hum, low at first, then rising.

An electric whisper crept into my skull.

In that final moment before it began, memory
flooded me.

The smell of cigarettes shared with Kalaris
beneath a quiet sky, smoke curling upward as
we spoke of futures that seemed impossible.

The warmth of my child pressed against
Lishara's chest. The weight of small fingers
gripping my thumb.

Lishara's hair brushing against my hand, the
curve of her smile and the fierce light in her
eyes when she believed in something.

My uncle's steady voice correcting my stance
and his bravery.

Every memory burned bright at once.

Pain and love.

Courage and grief.

Laughter echoing through courtyards now
silent.

The machine hummed louder.

Pressure built behind my eyes.

I fought.

I clung to every face.

Every street.

Every word.

But the device was merciless.

It threaded through my mind with cold precision, it pulled at threads of memory and severed them, it unraveled streets and smoke and whispered plans, it stripped away the man who had fought in the alleys.

The man who had loved fiercely, the man who had chosen defiance.

The last thing I felt was not fear.

It was hope.

A small stubborn spark.

Zarim's rage, now carried by Lishara running
into darkness with our child in her arms.

Then the light went out.

Far beyond the city walls, I imagine she kept
running.

Through fields and broken stone.

Through fear and exhaustion.

Carrying maps and memory and a sleeping
child.

Behind her, Zarim lay beneath Murzano's
shadow.

Scarred and afraid, but still alive.

Memory does not die easily in a city built by
stubborn hands.

Night closed over everything but the city
remembered what I no longer could.

And somewhere inside the fortress walls, I
opened my eyes as someone else.

A mind emptied of love, purpose and dreams.

Unaware that I had ever been more.

Unaware that beyond the broken edge of
Zarim, hope still moved beneath the silver
light...