

Kindling



A novel by Shahriyar Eghdam Shargh

• Chapter One

A jay's screech cut through the window
splitting the moment of silence in half.

I stood with Arvenash facing the high table
when all the guards were excused, waiting for
them to reveal our fates.

The words 'Welcome' haunted our minds for
moments, the woman was a tall and thin
figure wearing a long black and grey dress, her
golden hair fell to the sides, decorating her
shoulders.

“It’s a privilege to have you here gentlemen.”

Her voice lingered in my mind like a fading song.

“I’m afraid a demonic fever has claimed our king pinning him to the bed since the morning.” She continued with a calm voice.

“His situation gets worse as the sun moves westwards.”

“Ah,” the voice in my head murmured, “So that’s what royalty calls it, The sun.”

“Zarim needs a man to act as the steward of the city until the fever passes judgment on our king.” She continued.

She kept her dark blue eyes on Arvenash as she spoke.

Another member of the high table stood up from his seat beside her, “Arvenash of Tahl,” He said, “I’ve studied the borders of your knowledge in the past years.”

Arvenash remained silent.

“We came to the result that you shall fulfil this task as the caretaker of the city until the king recovers.” The woman completed his sentence.

“And what will be my fate after the king recovers?” Arvenash asked politely.

“Your sins shall be forgiven, and peace shall be restored to your days.” The man added without hesitation.

“And if I refuse your terms?” Arvenash asked.

“Then you shall face the consequences of your treason at once.” The man replied.

“So, I will take my place as the steward of the city when you see fit.” Arvenash answered.

A curve shaped the lips of the woman facing us as soon as she heard the answer, “Then you will act as steward of the city with our counsel.” She added with a calm voice.

“Will one of the members join me for counsel and communication?” Arvenash asked.

“Certainly not!” the man said, “A candidate will be set to perform as counsellor.”

“Do I have the liberty to name this candidate your highness?” Arvenash asked gently.

The other members of the high table shifted towards the woman as if asking for her verdict, “Proceed.” She simply said keeping her eyes locked on Arvenash.

“I name the young man standing beside me your highness.” Arvenash replied.

“And why should we grant your wish Arvenash of Tahl?” The woman asked softly.

“Phlinter is one of the bright citizens of Zarim,” Arvenash replied. “He knows the city and its people far better than anyone in the fortress, therefore he can do a remarkable job

in keeping the city together until his majesty gets his strength back from the fever.”

The woman’s eyes shifted towards me as if she was looking directly into my soul,
“Phlinter,” She said, “The high table had decided to execute you for your disobedience of the king’s orders, but if Arvenash claims that you will be a worthy companion then that would be a waste, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, your highness” I replied.

“Then it’s settled.” Another woman from the isolated end of the table said.

The man sitting next to her nodded.

All the five members of the high table stood up.

“Henceforth, Arvenash of Tahl shall act as the steward of the city and Phlintar shall act as his right hand,” The woman in grey silk spoke.

She looked towards me again sending a shiver down my spine knowing that my life is between her lips, “You shall report to us directly Phlintar, is that understood?” She said in a very calm tone.

“Yes, your highness.” I replied bowing before the high table.

“Very well then,” She said looking towards Arvenash, “I call the end of this meeting, your

duties are effective immediately Arvenash of Tahl.”

“You may be excused.” The man sitting next to her added after she was seated.

We turned away from the table as all five members were seated and walked through the doors, Kalaris greeted us on the other side, “What was the verdict?” He asked.

“They called us steward and the counsellor.” Arvenash replied.

“The king didn’t have a steward for as long as I can remember.” Kalaris said.

“The king is critically ill,” I said, “They picked us to hold things together until he recovers.

“Very well then,” Kalaris replied, “I will accompany you to the exit of the tree.”

Arvenash nodded and we followed Kalaris towards the the exit doors of the fortress, I never knew they called it the tree inside the walls.

Must be because of the maze they built within the walls, every corner seems to lead to a dark end and I couldn't see the end of any corridor no matter how hard I looked, it's easy to get lost withing these walls.

A flitching light caught my attention from under a door in a corridor, “What is that?” I asked Kalaris.

“That’s the door to the laboratory,” Kalaris replied patiently, “They build all sorts of things over there, things I could never solve their riddles.”

The exit door was facing us before we noticed, “Well it seems like our way separates here gentlemen.” Arvenash said.

A sound of rushing footsteps broke the silence all of a sudden, a young man ran towards us with a letter in his hands, “The high table members wanted this paper delivered to you urgently sir Kalaris.” He said catching his breath.

Kalaris opened the letter and read it out loud.

“Sir Kalaris of house Rifaad, by the order of the high table you are to announce Arvenash of Tahl as the steward of the city in to the public at city center, effective immediately.”

The letter instructed.

“Well, it appears our journey continues to the city center gentlemen.” I spoke.

Kalaris nodded in agreement and Arvenash replied with a smile.

A silver light greeted us as we walked out of the doors opening to the city.

Outside, Zarim was still moving as we walked towards the city center.

Two shadow figures were trading hands as we were walking by, they faded away as soon as they saw Kalaris's armor glowing in the silver light.

Children who stayed late outside playing finally listened to their mothers calling and ran to their homes, fading in darkness.

Merchants moved in groups sharing a laughter encouraged by the power of ale and wine, ignoring our existence entirely.

Zarim was shutting down every step we got closer to the city center, as the cold wind stirred my hair.

We measured the city with our boots as we passed the brothel, young women tried to get

our attention from the windows with their beauty and their colorful outfits.

Kalaris ignored them as me and Arvenash were enjoying the view.

A young woman approached us from the brothel.

“Do you want company handsome?” She said dragging her hands across Arvenash’s clothes.

“Thank you for your kindness, maybe next time.” He replied politely.

The woman walked away upset the way she came.

“They are nothing but trouble,” Kalaris said almost to himself. “They enchant your thoughts with their commanding beauty and distract you from whatever task you have.”

“Said your uncle speaking in his youth.” The voice in my head murmured.

I loosed a laughter unwantedly, Arvenash smiled with his head down.

“You two think I’m wrong?!” Kalaris asked almost angry.

“Not at all my friend.” I replied.

“But one of them will keep you a slave to her beauty eventually.” Arvenash added.

“Come,” Kalaris said, “We’re almost there.”

We walked to the city center and Kalaris climbed on top of the fountain in the middle.

The people were buying food for their homes from the vendors, the vendors were bargaining with the people as if the day has just begun.

The torches hanging from the walls offered enough light to the streets of Zarim in night time.

“Attention people of Zarim!” Kalaris broke the soft tumult, turning it to silence in moments.

People stop what they were doing and shifted towards him to listen what the soldier had to say.

“This man is Arvenash of Tahl,” Kalaris continued holding Arvenash’s hand, “He shall serve as the steward of Zarim during the king’s illness by the order of the high table ministers.”

A festival of whispers conquered the silence after the crowd heard Kalaris’s announcement.

“Silence!” Kalaris shouted with a sharp voice.

“Me and my counsellor, Phlintar will serve the city as long as it’s necessary.” Arvenash said.

“Will there be change steward?” A vendor asked from the crowd.

“If it’s needed.” I answered.

“Will the prices burst high again tomorrow?”

A woman asked quietly.

“No change of price will be declared for a week.” Arvenash said with a sharp voice,

“Anyone who sells food more than the declared price first light tomorrow will be punished by the law, none of the children of Zarim shall starve under my watch.”

“That will be all of it until further notice”

Kalaris shouted.

The crowd cheered and separated slowly, each going to their homes to share the news.

Kalaris stepped down and joined us to continue our walk, a woman approached

breathlessly, “The patrols took my brother last night.” She said short of breath.

“Where to?” Kalaris asked.

She pointed towards a dark alley with a trembling figure.

“They went that way, please sir he just argued with the vendor for the price of food.” She said.

“We will look into it,” Arvenash replied, “He will be home safe in the morning.”

“Thank you, sir.” The woman replied softly.

We started walking as soon as the woman left.

“Too much kindness to the people will attract the high table’s wrath.” Kalaris said.

“They chose me to hold things together,” Arvenash replied, “No man is to be punished for speaking according to the law of Zarim.”

“Whatever you say steward.” Kalaris replied.

Arvenash nodded with a smile.

“This is the only hope Zarim has for change.” I spoke.

“Yes.” Arvenash said simply.

We kept walking in the torch lights of the city passing the streets decorated by the silver light.

“Well, this is my place.” I spoke.

“Farewell Phlintar.” Arvenash said, “Take care of yourself.” Kalaris added.

I found my way to the door and knocked.

The girl opened the door, I could see the shock in her beautiful eyes, “You came back.” She said.

“For now.” I replied.

My uncle was sleeping in his wheel chair.

“Oh, what I wouldn’t give to his reaction!” The voice in my head whispered.

“I’m happy you came back safe Phlintar.” The girl said softly, her voice was like music after all that I’ve endured.

“It has been a long day.” I told her with a smile.

She held my hands.

“Come, you need to rest.” She said.

The night had ended a series of harsh days I’ve lost count of but yet, hope finds its way to us somehow even if its messenger is darkness itself.

• Chapter Two

Morning light finds its way to Zarim again.

The pale disk rises slowly from behind the mountains and slides between the towers watching over the city without judgment and the city wakes like a patient who just received the proper treatment.

I lie still and I enjoy the peaceful morning.

Pipes begin to warm somewhere beneath the building, metal clicking softly as it expands.

A cart rattles in the distance with uneven wheels, its driver whistling to the horse that knows the route better than he does.

A shutter opens, then another...

For a long time in many years, the morning is peaceful.

No sound of metal birds scanning the streets, no sound of boots roaming the city and the central bell remains still.

If there were panic, I would hear it by now.

If there were orders, they would echo, metal birds would shift patrol paths, messengers would cut corners too sharply, and guards would announce themselves too loudly.

None of that happens today.

The city is aware but it hasn't decided what kind of a day awaits us.

The girl is already up.

She moves near the small table with the practiced quiet of someone who learned early that noise could draw the wrong kind of attention.

She takes every action carefully, she breaks bread and pours water but it sounds like nothing is happening in the room.

“You didn’t sleep,” she says, without turning.

“I did,” I reply. “Just not all at once.”

She slides a piece of bread toward me across the table, it leaves a faint trail of crumbs, which she brushes away with the side of her hand before I can say a word.

“Then eat,” she says. “Before the city summons you.”

I sit and I eat like I was told.

The bread is coarse, baked too quickly and with too much bran, but at least it’s warm. Someone cared enough to light a fire early to make it for our table.

Outside, Zarim continues to stay together after all the events we experienced.

I step towards the door to greet the day that was gifted to us.

Arvenash is there when I open the door, Kalaris stands next to him without his armor like an ordinary man, it seems I opened the

door before they get a chance to knock on the door.

The door closes behind us after I welcome them in.

“We shouldn’t meet at the fortress,” Arvenash says immediately.

“The walls there listen too closely.” I answer.

Arvenash nods in agreement.

My uncle sits near the window in his chair, blankets folded carefully over what remains of his legs, at least the chance of infection seems unlikely.

He glances at Arvenash with interest.

“So,” my uncle says. “You survived the high table.”

Arvenash exhales with a humorless laugh.

“Barely sir.”

“Sit,” my uncle adds, gesturing with two fingers. “If you want to prove to the people that you’re one of them start by acting like them.”

We gather around the table.

The girl remains nearby, busying herself with nothing in particular while listening to everything.

“They named me Steward,” Arvenash begins.

“I’m one of the people, nothing more.”

“That matters to most of the people.” Kalaris says immediately.

“It does,” I agree. “But you don’t have much power if the high table controls you.”

“I don’t have to bring change to the city alone, you will help me along the way, and the people will follow when they see our true purpose.” Arvenash replies putting his finger on the table.

“Another one with a motto...” the voice in my head murmurs.

“They’ll ask of you to report my every step to them,” Arvenash continues. “I trust you can buy us time by twisting the truth and pretending everything is just as it was.”

“I will do what’s needed to change the people’s lives for the better.” I replied.

“There is no better legacy than to bring joy to the people for a ruler.” my uncle adds. “Do your part accurately and the people will be your greatest asset along the way.”

Kalaris leans forward, forearms on the table.

“The soldiers are still under the king’s direct command, they’ll report anything they see out of the ordinary to the high table for a handful of coins.”

“Good point,” I reply. “Then we must start small and carry on step by step.”

Arvenash nods slowly. “So, gentlemen, what happens today?”

“We begin with food rations, many people can barely afford enough to survive, if we come up with solutions for this issue we can win the people’s trust.” I responded.

“I might be able to help,” My uncle says.

He rolled his wheel chair to a corner of the house and opened a cupboard and started searching in it, “There it is!” He said after a moment.

In his hand was a rolled paper when he came back towards the table, he opened it once he got to us and spread it on the table.

An old piece of paper large enough to cover the entire desk with marks or charcoal and

red ink markings all over it, patched and bruised like time wasn't kind to it at all.

“This is an old map of the city we got during the war.” My uncle said, “The map marks all the routes of the city, rations, weapons and everything else that come in or go out of the city is marked on this map.”

“Interesting!” Kalaris said tracing his finger on the map, “Only one of these routes is open to pass rations to the city storage, I was set on patrol there once.”

“I've seen it too,” Arvenash replied, “It's heavily guarded and a handful of merchants have the permission to do their business.”

“So, who grants them permission and why?” I asked.

“Good question.” Arvenash replied.

“I have a few friends there,” Kalaris said with a calm voice, “I’ll ask them who seals the trade charts before they leave.”

“Yes,” I said “But whoever gives them permission to trade wants the other routes closed to keep the other merchants out of business, so that they can keep all the profit to themselves.”

“Phlinter is right,” Arvenash replied, “And whoever that is, controls all the seven routes leading to the city.”

“Eight” the girl whispered.

All the heads turned to her as she spoke,

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“There are eight routes leading to the city,”

She replied as she walked towards the desk.

“Look,” She said drawing her finger across the

map, “They brought me through a secret way

to sell to the brothel, a way my father’s army

didn’t know about.”

“Are you sure it’s there?” Kalaris asked.

“Yes,” She replied, “Right...Here.” Pointing to a

scratched red mark on the map barely visible.

“I will go look into it as soon as I can.” Kalaris

said.

“I know some old merchants that can help bring supplies to the city, they just need boats and open water.” My uncle added.

“Luckily we’re surrounded by the sea.” I said reading the map.

“I will have two boats ready at this point by noon.” Arvenash added.

“And I will gather young people who can work from the bazar.” I said.

“Then let’s get to work.” Kalaris replied.

We separated as soon as we went out, Kalaris went to the route with the map in his hand, Arvenash went to the fortress to bring the

boats and I went to the bazar to gather manpower for the job.

The pale disk was hammering the light to my forehead by mid morning, I could feel my hair is all wet by the time I reached my destination, a woman ran towards me and grabbed my hand, “Thank you sir.” She said gently, “My brother came home safe this morning.”

A smile forced itself on my face as soon as I heard the news, “Good to know,” I said without thinking why I came here in the first place.

I called as soon as she turned away, “Pardon me fair maiden, a word?” She turned to me and said, “Yes sir?”

“Will your brother be interested to work for the steward?” I asked.

“Who wouldn’t sir?” she said softly, “I will go fetch him right now.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “I’ll be here when you come back.”

The bazar was as crowded as ever, people buying as much as they could with the handful of coins they possessed, the vendors didn’t raise the price today, so the people seized the opportunity to get as much as they possibly could in their baskets.

The soldiers set on guard in the bazar didn't have much to do so they were playing a game in the corner, laughing and enjoying the easy day.

The woman called for me after a tour in the bazar, her brother looked like a capable young fellow, "This is one of the steward's men," She said, "I'm his counsellor." I corrected her.

"Pardon me counsellor," she said, "He has an offer for you." She continued looking at her brother.

"I am at your debt milord," the young man said.

"No need for formality young man," I replied, "I'm still one of the people, nothing more."

“What would you have me do sir?” He asked politely.

“We need young sailors to work in one of the routes on the far end of Zarim.” I replied, “You will be paid handsomely and you will have your own share on the supplies you bring to the bazar.”

“When do I start sir?” the young man asked, “Right now if you can.” I replied.

A bird’s song stole my attention for a split second, as if it was happy to see the city so alive in so little time.

“Can I bring my friends sir?” the young man asked after a moment, “As many as you can young man.” I replied with a smile. “Meet me

at this location in the afternoon” I said pointing directions on the map I carried.

“Yes sir.” He replied gratefully.

The bird kept singing on the vendors stall as the woman and her brother were leaving to their residence.

I turned away to the location we were supposed to meet by mid morning, “The dungeon lessons paid off I see.” The voice in my head whispered.” I returned a smile and kept walking.

The meeting point wasn’t far from the bazar so it was a short walk for me.

I saw kalaris from a far standing at the location before the time we were supposed to meet, “You’re early.” I said, “I was bored.” He replied smiling.

Arvenash appeared shortly after with two old men, “Did you find our crew?” He asked me gently. “I managed to find enough men to pass through today’s labor but we need more.” I replied.

“These to seniors are your uncle’s friends,” Arvenash said, “They came to offer their experience.”

“And the boats?” Kalaris asked.

“Already on their way to the location with all the supplies fishermen need.” Arvenash replied.

“Excellent.” I said, “Did you clear the way?” I asked Kalaris.

“The way was open all along.” He replied.

The wind moved through the tall grass beside the path, bending it in slow waves.

Kalaris folded the map once and tucked it beneath his arm.

“Lead the way,” Arvenash said.

Kalaris turned without another word and began walking.

We followed him along a narrow trail that branched away from the familiar roads.

The path was uneven beneath our boots, stones shifting underweight.

This path had not known traffic in years.

Weeds grew stubbornly between its cracks.

Thorned shrubs leaned inward as if trying to close it entirely.

The city sounds faded behind us with every step.

Instead, we heard insects humming in the heat and the distant rhythm of water striking rock, the air grew sharper, tinged with salt.

A gull cried somewhere beyond the cliffs.

Arvenash walked beside me, hands clasped behind his back.

“If this remains unnoticed,” he said quietly, “then the high table has grown careless.”

“Or confident,” I replied.

Kalaris slowed as the path curved downward between two rocky rises, the grass thinned. Sand began to mix with soil.

Then we saw it.

The inlet.

A crescent of quiet shoreline tucked between dark stone walls, no guard posts nor banners. No patrol marks carved into the rock, the tide rolled in and out with calm indifference.

And we were not alone.

The woman's brother stood near the water,
sleeves rolled high, hair tied back.

Ten young men waited with him, some holding
coils of rope, others standing beside two
modest fishing boats pulled halfway onto the
sand.

They straightened when they saw us
approach.

“You found it,” the young man said, relief and
pride sharing space in his voice.

“We found it in the first place,” Kalaris
answered.

The boats were old but solid, their hulls bore scars from seasons past.

Nets lay bundled nearby in thick heaps, heavy with salt and memory.

“You came ready,” I said.

“We came early,” he replied. “The tide favors those who respect it.”

The elders Arvenash had brought earlier in the day were already kneeling beside one vessel.

One ran his hand along the wood, pressing firmly at certain points.

The other lifted an oar and tested its balance.

“They will float,” one of them muttered. “If handled properly.”

Preparation began without ceremony.

The nets were unrolled across the sand in long sweeping lines, knots were checked one by one and frayed rope was replaced.

The young men listened carefully as the elders explained how to fold the net so it would open cleanly when cast.

“Lay it like this,” the elder said, guiding rough hands with patient ones, “If you rush, it tangles and If it tangles, you lose the catch.”

Kalaris stepped into one boat to test its steadiness, the hull shifted before settling beneath his weight.

“Balance is everything,” he told the two boldest among them, “Do not fight the boat, Work with it.”

Arvenash knelt in the sand and secured the storage baskets so they would not slide once filled.

One of the boys hesitated.

“My lord, you need not soil your hands.”

Arvenash looked up calmly, “Today my hands are no cleaner than yours.”

That ended the hesitation.

The boats were pushed toward the tide together, shoulders leaned into wood.

Sand gave way slowly beneath their boots.

When the water lifted the hulls, the men
climbed aboard with careful movements.

The woman's brother stood at the stern of the
first boat.

"Let's row," he called.

The oars dipped.

The boats moved outward, cutting through
the surface in steady rhythm.

From shore we watched until they reached
deeper water where the sea darkened.

The first net was cast wide, it opened in the air
before sinking beneath the surface, the rope
trembled in waiting hands.

Then it jerked sharply.

The men pulled together to hold the net in shape.

Silver bodies broke through the water in a flash of movement and light.

A shout echoed across the inlet.

They emptied the catch into the baskets and cast again, and again.

With every haul the boats settled lower.

Confidence replaced caution, laughter carried across the water.

By late afternoon the vessels rode heavy with fish of all kinds.

When they returned, the young men leapt into the shallows and dragged the boats onto shore, baskets were lifted carefully and lined across the sand.

The fish shimmered in the lowering sun, scales reflecting gold.

Kalaris let out a slow breath, “This will turn heads.”

“Let it,” Arvenash said.

We walked back to the bazar carrying proof of the sea’s generosity.

Word traveled faster than we did.

By the time we reached the first stalls, people were already gathering.

The scent alone drew them in, vendors abandoned their counters, children stared wide eyed, even the soldiers on duty stepped closer, curiosity overcoming indifference.

The baskets were placed on wooden tables.

The elders oversaw weighing.

The young men wrapped portions in paper and cloth as coins clinked into bowls.

The crowd thickened.

It had been years since the city had seen fish in the market.

Soon it became clear that not everyone had enough coin, some counted small stacks twice, others stepped back embarrassed.

Arvenash stepped forward and raised his voice so all could hear.

“People of Zarim.”

The noise softened.

“Take what your households need, as much as you require, If you are short on coin, it will be placed on my tab.”

Murmurs spread through the crowd.

“The merchants may come to the fortress at first light tomorrow,” he continued steadily.

“Every debt will be honored in full.”

For a heartbeat no one moved.

Then a woman stepped forward, then a man.

Many followed.

No one took more than needed, gratitude replaced hesitation, the young men worked without pause until the baskets stood empty.

The last fish was handed over as the pale disk dipped low.

The woman's brother approached us, sweat on his brow, pride in his stance.

"We will return at dawn," he said.

"You will," Arvenash replied. "And you will not row alone again."

We parted at the edge of the bazar.

Kalaris took the upper road, Arvenash turned toward the fortress, I gathered a wrapped bundle and made my way home.

The girl opened the door before I knocked.

When she saw what I carried, her eyes widened.

My uncle wheeled closer as I placed the bundle on the table.

“The sea,” he said softly. “I had begun to think it abandoned us.”

The girl cleaned the fish carefully and set them to cook with herbs she had saved.

Garlic touched hot oil and filled the room with warmth, the scent alone felt like celebration.

We sat close at the table when it was ready.

The first bite was tender and rich, for a moment none of us spoke.

Outside, Zarim settled into night without alarm.

My uncle leaned back with quiet satisfaction. “This is how cities change,” he said. “One full stomach at a time.”

The fire burned low as we finished our meal.

And for the first time in many years, Zarim went to sleep having tasted the sea again.

• Chapter Three

A bird was singing at the window when I opened my eyes.

Not the sharp mechanical cry of the metal birds that haunted our rooftops, but a living creature perched somewhere beyond the shutters, its song was uneven and bold, as if it had claimed the morning for itself.

I lay still for a moment and let the sound settle.

The girl was tucked into her corner, blanket pulled close beneath her chin, a loose strand of hair rested across her cheek.

She breathed softly, untouched by the weight of yesterday's labor.

My uncle was already awake.

He sat at the desk near the window, the old war map spread wide before him.

A thin measuring cord stretched between his fingers, he adjusted it carefully along the coastline drawn in faded ink, marking distances with a small charcoal stub.

“Are you measuring our achievements?” I said quietly as I pushed myself upright.

“I am measuring opportunities,” he replied without looking at me, “Achievements fade away if you cannot take advantage of them.”

The bird outside shifted position and sang again.

Then, cutting through the gentle morning, came the distant hum of metal wings.

I sat up fully.

The metal birds were in the sky again, their patrol pattern steady and precise.

They did not shriek alarms, they simply watched.

“The high table would love to see what you’ve done!” The voice in my head stirred.

I rose from the bed and walked to the window. The city was already alive before my eyes,

stalls were open, merchants called to early customers.

Shafts were lifted to reveal bundles of fresh herbs and dried grain.

A cart rolled down the street, its driver knocking on doors as he passed, offering deliveries of grain and oil.

Zarim was awake in earnest.

I heard a knock on our door.

A very fragile knock sounded the door twice.

I went to answer it.

A small girl stood on the threshold, no older than ten, she held a bundle of fresh herbs tied together with twine.

The scent of mint and thyme drifted upward.

“Good morning, sir,” She said, looking up at me with steady eyes, “Would you like to buy herbs?”

Before I could answer, soft footsteps approached from behind, the girl of our house had woken and now stood beside me, her hair still slightly tousled.

“Oh, those are lovely,” she said warmly, kneeling slightly to meet the smaller girl at eye level, “How much are you asking?”

The two of them began a gentle negotiation, it was not harsh or defensive.

It was playful, the little merchant named her price with confidence.

The girl of our house countered with a smile and an exaggerated sigh.

They agreed to a price somewhere in between.

I watched them exchange coin and herbs, their laughter quiet but sincere.

It was a simple thing.

And it felt like something returning to life.

From farther down the street, I saw two familiar figures walking toward the house.

Arvenash and Kalaris.

They were not in a hurry, their expressions were lighter than usual.

When they reached us, the door was already open.

“Ah, I see we have competition,” Arvenash said, glancing at the small herb seller who bowed politely before slipping away.

“We welcome it,” I replied.

Kalaris gave a short nod, “Shall we?”

We walked together toward the eighth route.

The city felt different beneath our steps.

Conversations were louder, doors were open.

Even the soldiers seemed less rigid in their patrols, though the metal birds still circled overhead in mechanical arcs.

When we reached the inlet, work had already begun.

Two more young men had joined the crew. Our first young sailor greeted us with a raised hand, pride clear in his posture.

Nets were being checked, boats were pushed toward the tide.

“They asked to join at dawn,” He told us. “We can use extra hands.”

“That is how growth begins,” Arvenash said.

The boats launched smoothly, oars dipped in practiced rhythm, Kalaris remained on shore at first, correcting stance and balance before finally stepping into one of the vessels to guide them personally.

As the first nets were cast, Arvenash turned to me.

“Walk with me,” he said.

We left Kalaris with the fishermen and made our way back toward the fortress by a slower path that overlooked the city.

“The patrols concern me,” Arvenash said quietly.

“Without firm leadership, the soldiers will be led by chaos as we spoke before.”

“The Battle of the Blind Boars,” I replied.

He nodded, “Without a commander they may begin acting like bandits in uniform and the high table will not intervene unless it profits them.”

We passed through the bazar as we spoke.

It was fuller than I had ever seen it.

The presence of fish alone had altered the rhythm of trade, people lingered longer.

They carried more goods, voices overlapped in lively argument.

“If one item can shift the market like this,” Arvenash said thoughtfully, “imagine what several might do.”

“Then we must not think only of fish,” I answered.

He looked at me carefully. “Kalaris would make a great commander.”

I understood immediately.

“He will refuse,” I said.

“Perhaps,” Arvenash replied, “But refusal sometimes reveals the right man.”

Once we returned to the inlet.

Kalaris was already aboard one of the boats, calling us forward with a raised arm.

“Come,” he shouted. “You should see this.”

We stepped into a smaller vessel and rowed out toward a darker stretch of water beyond the usual fishing ground.

When we arrived, we were not alone.

Five ships rested there, sails lowered, hulls steady in the tide, they bore different banners, I could only recognize one with Mirzun’s banner.

They were not warships, their decks were open, stacked with crates and barrels.

They were merchants.

One of the captains stepped forward, gray beard braided neatly.

“You fish well,” he called across the water.

“We have watched since morning.”

Arvenash raised his voice in reply. “You are welcome to join our route.”

The captain shook his head, “We have obligations elsewhere, but perhaps we can trade some goods.”

He leaned on the rail and smiled.

“Fish for meat, gentlemen?” He continued.

The woman’s brother glanced at us, eyes bright.

“What do you offer?” he asked.

The captain gestured behind him, barrels of cured meat, crates of ink sealed in wax from

another ship, small chests of jewelry that
from Deravshkar, spices from Tahl and dried
fruit from Kelvard.

“We have no need for coin,” the captain said.

“Why take silver only to return and pay for fish
at double its worth? Let us trade directly.”

“Perhaps we will share the dungeon with the
sea this time?” The voice in my head stirred
again, “I can use some of its stories.”

And so, we traded with five other realms.

Right there upon the water.

Fish passed from our boats into theirs.

In return we received meat, ink, small crafted
ornaments, bolts of dyed cloth.

No coins changed hands, an honest trade for the benefit of both sides.

The exchange was brisk and respectful.

By the time the tide shifted, our boats were no longer heavy with fish but with possibility.

When we returned to shore, the young men stared at the cargo in disbelief.

“Load it carefully men,” Kalaris instructed, “Nothing spills.”

As they worked, Arvenash approached him.

“We have a matter to discuss.” He said.

Kalaris wiped his hands on a cloth, “If it concerns patrol routes, I will handle them.”

“It concerns command,” Arvenash replied.

“The soldiers require a leader, I intend to name you commander under the steward’s seal at dusk.”

Kalaris stiffened.

“I am a soldier,” he said firmly. “Nothing more, I follow orders, I do not seek to give them.”

“That is precisely why you must,” I said.

He looked between us, searching for motive.

“I do not want the responsibility,” he insisted.

“You do not want power,” Arvenash corrected,

“Responsibility is different.”

Silence stretched.

Finally, Kalaris exhaled slowly, “If I accept, it is to protect the city, not to stand above it.”

“That is all we ask,” Arvenash said.

We walked back to the bazar with carts heavier than the day before.

The sight of unfamiliar goods spread through the crowd before we even reached the central fountain, word moved like wind.

Arvenash climbed onto the fountain’s stone edge before the goods were unloaded.

“People of Zarim,” He called.

The market quieted.

“Under my authority of the steward’s seal, Kalaris is hereby appointed commander of

the city's soldiers, patrols will answer to him from this moment forward.”

Murmurs rippled outward, some surprised and some relieved.

Kalaris stood below, uncomfortable with the attention.

The announcement spread quickly through the bazar, by the time Arvenash finished his announcement, the goods were already being examined.

Meat replaced fish at the center tables.

Ink pots were lifted and admired and jewelry passed between careful fingers.

The market surged with new energy.

People who had spent coin freely the day before held it tighter now, waiting for the return of the new route team.

Other merchants watched from their stalls, displeasure visible in their tight expressions.

Yet the people wanted novelty, they were tired of the same goods each day.

Several established merchants approached us cautiously.

“We would purchase larger portions,” one of them offered. “At a fair discount.”

We studied them carefully, “Evening is for the people,” I said. “Come to the new route in the

morning with your proposals, if your offers strengthen the city, we will consider them.”

They agreed, though not happily.

By nightfall the bazar glowed brighter than it had in years.

We walked home beneath steady lamps, speaking quietly of patrol reforms and trade routes.

When I entered the house, the scent of cooked herbs still lingered from the morning purchase.

The girl examined the new spices with fascination, my uncle inspected the ink with professional curiosity.

Dinner that evening was richer than before.

Meat simmered with herbs, fresh bread
soaked in its juices.

We ate slowly, speaking of what tomorrow
might bring.

Outside, Zarim settled once more.

The metal birds still circled above.

But below them, the city was changing.

And this time, it was not afraid.

• Chapter Four

Morning unfolds gently over Zarim.

The light did not burst through the shutters.

It seeped in, pale and deliberate, tracing thin lines across the wooden floor before climbing slowly along the walls.

Dust motes drifted in the beam like suspended ash from a fire long extinguished.

I woke to the sound of a bird.

Not the metallic glide of patrol wings above the rooftops, but a small living creature perched somewhere beyond the window.

Its song was uneven yet persistent, it claimed the morning without asking permission.

For a moment I lay still and listen.

The city answered it.

There was a new quality to the sounds below.

A cart rolled over a metal surface earlier than usual then a door opened without hesitation, voices carried upward not in complaint but in exchange, someone laughed briefly, but it did not sound cautious.

I turned my head.

The girl was awake before I was, she stood at the window with one hand resting on the frame, the shutter pushed slightly open.

The breeze moved a loose strand of her hair across her cheek, she did not brush it away.

“It looks different outside,” she said quietly.

“What do you see?” I asked.

“That people are trying again.” She replied.

My uncle was already seated at the desk.

The old war map lay open before him, its parchment worn thin at the folds.

Faded red markings crossed over coastal sketches drawn in an older, steadier hand.

He had stretched a measuring cord from the inlet across the eighth route and anchored it with two small metal weights to keep it from shifting.

He did not look up when he spoke.

“Trying is not enough,” he said, “Results are what really matters.”

I rose and joined him at the desk.

He shifted the cord slightly and made a small charcoal mark along the margin.

“You see this?” he asked.

“The tide markings,” I said.

“Not only that, the old surveyor accounted for seasonal shift, the inlet will not betray the boats unless the wind turns hard from the north and If that happens, the eastern bend will need reinforcement.” He replied patiently.

“What material can we use?” I asked.

“Stone and timber bracing would hold,” he replied, “If you are to build institutions there, foundations must be thought of now, permanent buildings cannot stand on soft ground.”

The girl left the window and moved closer, curiosity bright in her eyes.

“You are already building it in your mind,” she said.

“I am preventing it from collapsing in reality,” my uncle answered gently.

He ran his finger along a shaded ridge beyond the river.

“Zarim is far beyond what you see on the surface,” he continued. “If trade continues to expand, you will require materials beyond what arrives by ship, stone, iron, timber, perhaps even ore.”

“You think there are mines?” I asked.

“I think there were once,” he replied. “Old markings suggest exploratory shafts were begun decades ago and abandoned but the War shifted priorities.”

The girl leaned over the desk.

“Would you reopen them?” She asked softly.

“If the city stabilizes,” he replied, “If leadership remains steady, mines demand trust, men do not descend into darkness unless they believe someone will raise them back out.”

His words lingered in the room.

Below us, the city grew louder.

Then the knock came.

It struck the door sharply and without rhythm.

Not the polite tap of trade, not the firm knock of a neighbor.

This was breathless urgency.

The girl stiffened.

My uncle lifted his head slowly.

“And who might that be?” he murmured.

I descended the stairs.

The knocking came again, followed by the sound of someone struggling to breathe.

When I opened the door, a young boy stood before me bent forward, hands braced against his knee caps, his hair clung to his forehead, his chest rose and fell quickly.

In his hand he held a folded parchment sealed in thick black wax.

“For the Steward and his counsel,” he managed.

I accepted the letter and broke the seal at once.

“You are summoned at first light,” I read as Arvenash and Kalaris reached the bottom of the stairs behind me, “Immediate presence required at the high table.”

The boy bowed, relief visible in the release of his shoulders, and ran back into the street.

The girl stood halfway down the stairs.

“Will they close the route?” she asked.

“If it’s not to their benefit,” Arvenash said quietly.

My uncle rolled the map with deliberate care.

“Remember,” he said to me, “Remind the high table that change is for the benefit of all of Zarim, even them.”

I nodded.

We stepped out into the morning.

The walk to the fortress cut through a city alive with cautious optimism, merchants arranged goods setting up their stalls, workers carried their tools to the workshop.

A smith's hammer rang against metal in a distance.

Above it all, the metal birds circled in wide mechanical arcs, observing without interfering.

The fortress rose ahead of us, like a tree as they called it for some reason.

Its gates opened at our approach.

Inside, the temperature dropped.

We were led through the inner courtyard and up into the high table chamber.

All five members were present.

They remained seated as we entered.

The woman in black and grey silk sat at the center, the fabric of her dress caught the light in subtle patterns, like storm clouds folding over one another.

Her hands rested folded upon the stone table.

“You have altered the balance of the city,” she began.

Her voice was calm and measured.

“We have improved its motion,” Arvenash replied.

“Did you believe we would not notice if you opened another gateway into the city?” She said ditching the smile she always wore.

The words settled heavily.

“We intended to report at first light,” Arvenash said evenly.

“You intended to report after coin began to flow,” she corrected, “Your new route has diverted profit from merchants operating along the legitimate passage sanctioned by this council.”

The grey bearded man beside her leaned forward slightly.

“Those merchants pay consistent shares,” he said, “They are reliable.”

I stepped forward.

“Reliable does not mean expansive,” I said.

“The new route has brought employment to young men who had none, employment produces wages and wages produce spending, spending produces revenue, your share increases not from isolation but from circulation.”

Another member tapped her fingers lightly against the table.

“You’re gambling.” She said slowly.

“We invest in growth,” I answered.

The woman studied me carefully.

“You presume to instruct us in economics sir?” She replied.

“I presume to describe what is visible, your highness.” I answered calmly.

Silence followed.

“One thousand coins per week, in exchange and the route remains open.” She said after a brief moment.

The demand was precise.

“Six hundred.” Arvenash replied without hesitation.

The chamber stirred.

“One thousand secures our losses,” the grey bearded man insisted.

“Six hundred secures your future gain,” Arvenash countered, “Excessive demand will suffocate the route before it matures, allow it space to grow and you will receive more than a thousand in time.”

The woman’s gaze shifted briefly toward the others.

They conferred in low voices.

At last, she inclined her head.

“Six hundred coins each week, failure to deliver will close the route.”

Arvenash bowed slightly.

“It will not fail.”

The second matter rose immediately.

“You promoted a commander,” the grey bearded man said, turning toward Kalaris,

“Without approval.”

“The troops require structure,” Arvenash replied.

“The king yet lives,” the man said sharply.

“But he does not issue orders,” I added.

“Without directives there are no assignments, without assignments there is no payment and without payment, discipline fractures and soldiers become desperate.”

A third member spoke for the first time.

“You suggest our own troops might turn against us if they don’t receive payment?”

“I suggest idle men with weapons are unpredictable,” I said carefully. “Command restores clarity.”

Kalaris stepped forward.

“I do not seek power,” he said. “I seek order.”

The woman observed him.

“And you will act only within law?”

“I swear by the Book of Zarim and no further.”

After deliberation, the high table agreed.

An attendant approached carrying a metal banner clasp bearing the insignia of Zarim, it was fastened onto Kalaris' armor.

“You will issue no independent orders,” The woman warned. “All major actions will be discussed with this council.”

Kalaris inclined his head.

Before dismissing us, the woman spoke once more.

“If this route exists, it will be formalized, a granary will be constructed there, stalls for butchers and workshops for wood and iron, Craftsmen will process incoming goods and pay rent toward the six hundred coins promised.” She said carefully.

Arvenash nodded.

“It will be done.” He replied politely.

We were excused.

When we stepped back into the open air beyond the fortress walls, the weight of the chamber did not follow us.

Stone held its tension within itself.

The city however, was moving.

Kalaris did not pause.

He descended the fortress steps and crossed the inner courtyard with a different presence than before.

The new banner mark fastened to his armor caught the sunlight.

It was not overly large, yet it altered how he was seen.

Authority, when given form, changes the air around a man.

A patrol of soldiers advanced along the outer wall, their pace steady, their expressions neutral, they halted when they saw him approach.

“You are needed,” Kalaris said.

One of the soldiers glanced at the others before speaking.

“On whose orders?” The other soldier asked.

Kalaris turned slightly, allowing the insignia to catch the light.

“On mine.”

The hesitation vanished and the soldiers straightened at once.

Arvenash stepped forward.

“You will move through the city without your weapons,” he instructed, “Carry only the glowing boards, knock on every door with courtesy, ask each household what skills they possess, engineers and stone masons, black smiths, wood workers, tanners, builders are vital to us, and if you found anyone capable of trade, you report to me.”

“No one is to be compelled, this is not labor demanded in the name of a distant crown, it is opportunity offered for coin and stability, record their professions and instruct them to gather in the center of the bazar.” I added.

The soldiers listened carefully.

“You will speak clearly,” Arvenash continued.

“All work will be paid in full, food will be provided where needed, there will be no empty promises.”

The patrol divided and moved outward.

Without swords at their sides, they appeared different, less imposing, more human.

The first doors opened cautiously.

An elderly stone mason stood in his doorway with arms crossed, his back was bent but his eyes were sharp.

“What is wanted?” he asked.

“Your skills,” a soldier replied.

The mason’s expression shifted.

“I have not laid foundation stone in six years.”

“Do you wish to work again?” the soldier asked.

After a long pause, the mason nodded.

His name glowed softly as it was written onto the board.

Across the street, a young blacksmith wiped soot from his hands and listened with disbelief.

“You are offering payment?” he asked.

“In full,” came the answer.

“And food?” Another young man asked.

“Yes.” The soldier said patiently.

He looked over his shoulder at his forge, then back at the soldier.

“I can shape iron for granary hinges and stall braces,” He said.

The professions of the two young blacksmiths joined the others on the glowing surface.

Throughout Zarim, doors opened.

A woman skilled in preserving herbs stepped forward to offer knowledge of storage methods.

A carpenter described beam structures suited for coastal humidity.

A former engineer who had once repaired city gates spoke with quiet intensity about drainage channels and flood prevention.

The boards filled with names and trades.

By midday, word had spread.

The center of the bazar transformed.

It was no longer only a place of exchange, it became a gathering of purpose.

Men and women stood together offering what they could do.

Not what they were forced to do, not what they feared to refuse.

Assignments were spoken openly.

“You will oversee the granary foundation.”

Kalaris said.

“You will prepare timber framing.” A soldier added.

“You will measure stall placements along the eastern side.” Another soldier said.

Unused tools were fetched from storage rooms, aprons were tied, sleeves were rolled.

Hope does not always arrive as a shout.

Sometimes it arrives as structure.

While this unfolded, the boats had not been idle.

By late afternoon, word reached us that sails were visible beyond the inlet.

Arvenash and I made our way toward the new route to inspect both the returning ships and the progress already made.

Kalaris remained in the city center, issuing patrol rotations and ensuring order held without intimidation.

The new route no longer felt temporary.

Timber had been stacked neatly along the shoreline.

Stones gathered in preparation for foundation work.

Men measured distances with cord and marked boundaries in chalk.

When the first boat docked, its hull heavy with goods, a quiet murmur of satisfaction moved along the pier.

Rice sacks were lifted carefully, crates of vegetables were handed down.

Bundles of fresh herbs released a clean fragrance into the salt air.

Fish were packed in woven baskets layered with crushed ice.

Glass bottles containing perfume shimmered in the descending light.

Our young sailor supervised unloading with focused precision.

“We did not waste the tide,” he said as Arvenash approached.

“Well done young man,” Arvenash replied.

I was set to examine the organization along the dock.

“Once the granary stands,” I said, “these goods will move even faster.”

“They will,” the young sailor agreed, “And more ships will follow.”

Carts were brought forward.

Together they accompanied the goods back toward the bazar.

By the time they arrived, the square was filled not only with volunteers but with families ready to purchase what the city had not seen in abundance for years.

Children reached for fruit, housewives examined rice grains between their fingers. The scent of herbs drifted across the square. Coin changed hands steadily.

But something else moved more freely, Trust.

Workers who had volunteered earlier now spent the coin they had already been

promised, merchants discussed stall placements with craftsmen.

The idea of the new route was no longer abstract, it was visible in the baskets carried home.

As dusk approached, lamps were lit along the main paths, their warm glow softened the stone edges of the city.

Kalaris oversaw the final patrol shift before releasing the soldiers for rest.

They moved through the streets calmly, there was no unrest to manage.

Only motion to guide.

When night finally settled fully over Zarim, the metal birds continued their silent circuits above, yet below them, life had shifted.

I returned home.

The girl opened the door before I knocked.

“You look tired,” she said.

“It was worth it.” I replied.

Inside, the room was warm.

My uncle had already reopened the map.

This time additional charcoal markings dotted the rocky ridge beyond the river bend.

“Sit,” the old man said.

I removed my outer coat instantly and joined him at the desk.

“I studied the contour lines again,” his uncle began, “The older survey suggests mineral density beneath this section.” He tapped a narrow valley, “If there were exploratory shafts, they would have been dug here.”

“You believe they remain accessible?” I asked.

“Possibly collapsed or sealed intentionally, I’ve lived enough to see both happen.” He spoke.

“For what reason?” I asked.

“A way through to the heart of the city is very dangerous in the time of war.” He said pointing to the map, “Here and here you, see?”

I nodded.

“If foreign troops start pouring in these locations there is no way to stop them.” He continued.

The girl leaned against the wall, listening closely.

“If we reopen them,” She asked, “would it make the city stronger?”

“It would make it self sufficient,” the uncle replied. “Trade is vital, but internal resources prevent dependency.”

I considered this carefully.

“The high table agreed to allow growth,” She said. “But their agreement rests upon coin, if we expand too quickly, they may tighten control.”

“Then we expand steadily,” my uncle answered. “Structure before scale, foundation before height.”

I nodded slowly.

“Tomorrow, we inspect the ridge.” I added.

My uncle allowed himself a faint smile.

“I suspected you would say that.” He spoke.

Dinner was simple but abundant.

Fresh fish from the new route, rice prepared with herbs newly arrived, fruit sliced carefully and shared without haste.

Outside, Zarim rested in preparation.

And for the first time in many years, the city did not feel like stone resisting change.

It felt like stone being shaped with purpose.

The night deepened.

Above, the metal birds continued their watch.

On the surface, foundations were already forming.

And Zarim, quietly and without proclamation, had begun to rebuild itself.

• Chapter Five

I wake with a fondle on face, a hand so soft that I believed I was dreaming until I opened my eyes to see the morning light dancing between the girl's hair, revealing every hair strand to a different gorgeous color.

“Now that's a view to wake up to.” The voice inside my head murmured.

“Wake up,” The girl said, “Arvenash and Kalaris are here!”

I sat up as I heard the news, “Why so early?” I asked the Lishara.

“I don’t know,” She said, “I just opened the door when I saw them walking here from the window.”

I forced myself to stand up and walk to the desk, the girl came with me as we walked to greet our early guests.

My uncle was sitting at the desk with Arvenash and Kalaris showing them the points of interest on the map as they nodded.

“At last, we have you among us.” Kalaris said, when I stepped into the room.

“We have urgent news.” Arvenash said right after Kalaris finished speaking.

“What’s the news?” I asked.

“The high table announced that the king’s fever took him in his sleep.” Arvenash said, “We are to make a public announcement in the city center at mid morning.”

“Will this be the end of our work?” I asked.

“With the king gone,” Kalaris said, “A new king will be crowned soon.”

“And there is no need for us.” Arvenash agreed.

“That’s a shame,” My uncle said, “You have accomplished too much to go back.”

“We will have a verdict soon gentlemen,” Arvenash said. “Let’s do our tasks ahead while we have time.”

“Then let’s get moving.” Kalaris said.

I stood up and joined the others.

We left the house as the morning light dominated the city’s surface, we started a pleasant walk across the city, enjoying what seemed to be our last day on the role.

“Well, we had a good run as long as it lasted gentlemen,” Arvenash said, “But everything comes to an end eventually.”

I nodded.

“At least we will remain as good lads in the people’s memory.” Kalaris added.

“That’s all that matters.” I spoke.

Arvenash agreed with us.

A cart passed by our side as we made our way to the bazar, people were on their way to the city center, some carried construction tools, some had ink and papers beneath their arms, others carried cold drinks for the gathering.

Some nodded to us, some greeted us warmly, some offered us drinks and goods to eat on the way.

Arvenash climbed on the fountain located on the city center once we reached the bazar, the pale disk was now fully dominant, shining golden light on our foreheads watching over us all.

“People of Zarim,” Arvenash called with a loud voice echoing through the crowd.

The people gathered quietly around the fountain to listen what the steward had to say.

“I’m terribly sorry to be the prophet of such unpleasant news,” He continued.

Some looked at him sharper than before, some others left their drinks and snacks to join the event.

“It has come to my attention that king kalthaer died in his sleep last night.” Arvenash announced.

A tide of whispers burst through the crowd towards our way, almost felt like it’s about to drown us, then the questions rose one after another.

“What will be the outcome of our hard labor in the new route?” An old man asked.

“Will there be a new king crowned?” A woman asked.

“Will they close the new route again?” another asked.

“People,” Arvenash said calming the tension, “I do not know of the fate of our city after the king’s death, but I will stand before the high table for answers as soon as I can, and when I had the answers, I will inform you in the new route by the evening.”

“That’s it people,” Kalaris added, “Lets go to the new route and start the day with some work.”

The people followed Kalaris and his patrol to the new route leaving me and Arvenash to leave for the fortress for the news.

Some hesitated, “What good is our work if a new king closes the route again?” one asked of the others, some agreed with him stopping, some followed Kalaris saying “Then we shall gather all the coin we can get out of today’s labor.” It was the highest paying work in Zarim after years after all.

“Come Phlinter,” Arvenash said, “Let’s get our answer from the high table as soon as we can.”

“So, it’s back to the dungeon again.” The voice in my head murmured. “Or worse.”

We started walking through a half empty city, most had left for the open routes deserting their shafts and stalls, the golden light shined across the smooth surface of Zarim while the metal birds circled around empty streets confused.

“Look,” Arvenash said, “Those two are spying on a pigeon.”

“What a bunch of idiots.” The voice in my head said.

We shared a hard laughter in the deserted city, streets so empty that the sound echoed through them.

“We have come a long way to go back now.” I said almost to myself.

“Cheer up,” Arvenash said, “We can’t be sure until we hear a clear verdict.”

“At least people will speak good of us long after we’re no longer here.” I responded.

“Indeed,” Arvenash said, “The point is to be remembered as a just caretaker, not to rule a long period of time.

“There are those in history who ruled for decades only to be cursed by the people every time they hear their names.” He added.

We made it to the stairs of the fortress after a short walk, a boy ran out.

“Steward and the counsellor are required at presence the high table immediately.” He said ending his sentence with a short bow.

“Good to know lad,” Arvenash said dragging his hand in the boy’s hair.

We stepped up the stairs of the fortress as the gate opened before us.

“Well,” Arvenash said quietly, “Let’s go face the truth.”

The maze behind the walls was as confusing as ever, the corridors leading to darkness with sparks of fainting light, the halls abandoned to host a festival of dust and insects.

Sounds of footsteps rattled behind the walls only to disappear before I can make figure of what caused them.

At the very last, we reached the gates leading to the high table.

Gates decorated with rubies and garnets, glowing to prove their worth no matter how dark the surrounding are.

The gates opened to a table of obsidian living through waves of white veins pumping matter into the body of the largest abyss of darkness I've ever seen in my life, I couldn't stop staring no matter how many times I stood before it.

Behind it the five members were seated again, the woman covered in dark and grey silk holding our fate between her lips.

“It’s lovely to have you both before us again steward and the counsellor,” the woman said standing up after a moment of silence.

We bowed before them out of respect so poorly earned.

“I believe the news was spread successfully,” the woman said calmly.

“Yes, your highness.” I spoke.

“This team has been far more than simple ministers since the beginning, we see ourselves more merchants than ministers in

this room, isn't that right Steward?" The man with grey hair and beard said standing up.

"Yes, your highness." Arvenash replied nodding.

"The Kalthaer household has been generous to us over the long years of their reign, but I'm afraid they don't have much to left to offer,"

The man continued.

"This is not your concern of course," The woman added frowning, "Our proposal however is."

"Which is?" I replied.

"You two have a vision of expanding the city for the benefit of us all the people of Zarim as

I recall, do I stand correctly?” The woman followed.

“A vision the kalthaer house lacked over the years.” Another man added remaining in his seat padded with gold and dark red silk and shining diamonds.

“Therefore, we shall vote to the remaining of the stewardship and the counsel as the kings son comes of age.” The woman continued.

“He shall receive the training for a proper king as long as you prepare the city for his time” Another member added not quite visible under her cloak.

“Yes,” The woman added chuckling, “Of course he might not prove himself worthy of a

king through his hard training depending on your achievements.”

“And what shall be his fate if he doesn’t your highness?” Arvenash asked.

“That is by no means your concern Arvenash of Tahl!” The woman replied in a sharper tone.

“Understood, your highness” Arvenash replied.

“Meeting dismissed,” The woman said, “Keep up the good work.”

We bowed stepping back from the high table and out of the door.

“Poor kid punished for his father’s actions.” I said unconsciously once we started walking in the corridors.

“We are all punished for the crimes of our predecessors,” Arvenash replied. “Look at the bright side,” He said, “We can keep building up the city in the absence of an unworthy king.”

“Under an evil and corrupt team of ministers.” I replied.

“That is our burden,” Arvenash replied, “Every good deed has its price.”

“But you should be careful not to become the ruler you despise.” I said.

“I can never call myself king as long as we share the power together,” He said, “You will pull me back whenever I seek more than I should and I will do the same for you.”

We walked through the gates of the tree and started walking towards the new route wearing our happy faces because of the verdict.

“Think of all the institutions we can build in favor of the people...” Arvenash said.

“We can do more than any king has accomplished in this city,” I said, “All of us as a team.”

“Our vision is too big for one man.” Arvenash replied with a smile.

By the time our eyes saw the construction site the pale disk started to say it's farewells, the copper light shined in the sands of the docks in the new route as the foundations were built for the granary and the new stalls, all the people in the eighth route were working as hard as they could, for the final day they thought they had, some worked for more coin, some for their names to be carved upon the stones as the builders of a city so lost to the ages.

People starting rushing our direction once they saw our badges closing in from a far, "What was the verdict?" one asked.

"Shall we stop working?" another followed.

“People,” Arvenash said loudly holding his hands high chuckling, “The stewardship remains as long as the king’s son comes of age,” He continued, “Keep working to build our city to the most glorious city on the face of the muddy globe.”

The people cheered so loud that we couldn’t hear the tides, some started hugging each other, “Drinks on me!” The man in the drinking stall said shouting his lungs out.

People cheered and sang songs while dancing to celebrate their hard work paying off and their city built better than as long as the history book of Linguas recorded.

We joined the dance singing and drinking
wine, people worked with joy while singing as
if the work itself was part of the ceremony,
I've never seen Kalaris laughing so vividly
since the day we met, dancing with the young
sailor offering drinks on his own tab.

The birds joined us in singing not afraid of all
the shouting and noise in the area beneath
their feet.

The Labor Day lasted as long as the little
diamonds starting shining in the sky dancing
around the silver lunar that was mother to
them all.

We danced and sang our way back to the city
center, it was too late for shopping in the

bazar so everyone took their share of food on the steward's tab and left to share the night's joy with their families.

I counted my steps carefully until I reached a familiar scene at the doors of my residence, I carried so much food in my back that a horse would fall if you put it on its back.

A sound of a sword drawn out of its sheaf lingered in my ear as soon as I opened the door, "Halt at once you filthy bastard!" Shouted my uncle.

I fell to the ground laughing spilling all the goods.

“Wasn’t that the sound of a rebellion in the new routes?” He asked as soon as he recognized me holding his rusty sword up.

I loosed a laughter so high the girl shared it with me for the first time, “It was a celebration you old hog!” I said holding my hand against my mouth as soon as the words slipped by my tongue.

“You filthy excuse for a human being,” He frowned, “Then bring me some damn wine!” He laughed.

The three of us shared glasses of wine dancing and singing as the house beside us and the next did.

I know not when we fell asleep but the city
was drowning in joy as the night watched over
us, I can swear the silver lunar was smiling as
it noticed the city happy after so many years...

• Chapter Six

Morning light drifts across my face, warm and slow, as though the day itself is hesitant to wake me, I don't know where I am but it looks like home, something soft and warm is curled against me, tucked beneath my arm as if it has always belonged there.

My eyes snap open, a quiet, incredulous thought stirs in my mind.

“Oh,” The voice in my head laughed, “Look what happened last night.”

I breathe out, steadying myself, and let my hand move gently through the dark hair spilled across my chest.

The strands slip between my fingers like silk, and for a moment time loses its shape.

I lie there, listening to the hush of morning and the soft weight of the stranger resting against me, trying to piece together the path that led me to this quiet, impossible dawn.

I raise my head slightly to investigate my surroundings.

My uncle is in his wheel chair sleeping behind his desk perhaps tired of all the measuring and marking he makes on the old war map, searching for opportunities.

The head on my chest moves a little bit, a sound of humming comes through, a voice so beautiful that I want to reconsider my awareness.

“No,” the voice in my hear murmurs, “You’re wide awake.”

My uncle coughs himself out of sleep looking around him to shake off the long hours of rest a blanket was still on his lap covering what was left of his legs keeping them warm.

Once he glanced at me, he said nothing, only a curve shined in the old soldier’s white beard, a rare sight to witness.

My eyes were still searching for the girl as she was sleeping in my arms not yet knowing what happened last night as she woke up.

She raised her head, eyes fixed in mine drowning me in an ocean of dark beauty as the pale disk covered all I know in golden light gifting warmth to a world so cold once.

“I never knew the color black can be so beautiful.” The voice in my head whispered as I stared into those orbs of pure darkness trying to find meaning in them.

“Get up love birds.” My uncle said breaking the silence of the room, “We have work to do.”

We got up to dress properly for the day ahead of us as the city outside was awake long before us.

I went to the desk to investigate the map with my uncle, he pointed at the girl breaking bread and preparing a meal for the morning, for once I thought to myself that we had more food than just surviving, “Help, Lishara first.” My uncle said softly.

So, I went to help her with the meal, we sit at the desk folding the map to eat.

“I found some interesting foundations in the city yesterday on the map.” My uncle said to me pointing on the map.

“Foundations for what?” Lishara asked.

“Mine sites,” my uncle replied, “Places so reach with raw material that we can use for decades without ever thinking of coming short of supplies.”

“Think of all the institutions we can build using all those stones and iron ore.” I spoke.

“The city has a lot to do still.” Lishara said gently.

“Of course,” My uncle replied, the people are just getting started.

A harsh knock on the door shook me from my peaceful morning, I ran to the door.

I found a middle aged woman holding a baby at the door, “Milord please help.” She said almost whispering.

“What’s the problem?” I asked.

“My baby is burning with fever milord,” She said, “I took him to the physician but he didn’t treat him without coin.”

Lishara jumped out of her seat and ran to the door, “Come inside,” She said to the woman, “Hurry!”

“What do I do?” I asked of her.

“Why don’t you gather your friends and go to the physician to ask him the meaning of this

while I treat the baby with proper care?” She said sharply.

“You can treat people?!” I asked shocked.

“Go!” She said with a harsh voice.

I shifted towards my uncle for guidance as he gave me the look lifting his shoulders, so I opened the door and started walking towards the bazar.

The last night’s celebration left the city in ruins, clothes all over the streets, a metal bird was caught under one of them fluttering.

“Poor bastard!” The voice in my head murmured, “We have all sorts of fishermen in the city.”

I laughed at the scene since a city left in chaos of a celebration is the most beautiful sight I could imagine after years of seeing all kinds of ruins.

I ran towards the city center ignoring the rest of the path.

Arvenash was already there with a patrol of soldiers, Kalaris by his side instructing the soldiers to help the people clean up the city.

“Yes, commander,” one of them said from under his thick helmet, “Nothing is more pleasant than to serve the people in the time of their happiness.”

“Gentlemen, a word.” I said to Kalaris and Arvenash catching my breath.

“What’s the urgency my friend?” Kalaris asked laying his hand on my shoulder.

“We need to visit the physician at once!” I said.

“For what reason?” Arvenash asked politely.

“A baby was brought to my doorstep first light burning in fever,” I said, “The physician rejected his treatment even though he swore an oath to cure all those in need.”

“Let’s move gentlemen.” Arvenash said frowning.

We started walking toward the physician’s building without hesitation, Kalaris ran out of

words grinding his teeth as we walked hand on his sword, playing with the fixed button.

I lead the way since I brought my uncle to the physician a couple of times before.

We were too angry to talk along the way until, “We shall find a permanent solution for this problem after we speak to the physician.”

Arvenash said.

“Speak?!” Kalaris replied, “I’m going to teach him a lesson he won’t forget as long as he lives.”

“Get a hold of yourself my friend,” I said, “We are the symbols of law.”

“Apparently your law didn’t make its way to every corner of the city.” He replied with sharp eyes.

“Save your anger for the physician commander,” Arvenash said, “There is no point of fighting our own.”

“I’m sorry Phlintar.” Kalaris said shortly after.

“It’s alright my friend, we’re all full of rage,” I replied with a smile.

We passed the streets under the golden light shining over the metallic surface of the ground.

The streets were quite today.

Maybe the people were tired of the joy they shared last night.

“Look lively lads,” Kalaris said, “We’re here.”

The physician’s building stood tall among others, the copper color of the metal surface shined brighter than ever on top of the building with bold letters carved into it, a sign of corrupt wealth vividly shown feeding off the people’s desperate need for cure in the time of need.

We stepped up the stairs as I could hear Kalaris’s heart finding a way out of his chest through his armor.

The office was so quiet, the smell of boiling herbs and spices teased my nose as we walked in, a young woman was seated in a chair behind a desk holding a glowing board.

“I require the physician’s attention at once young lady!” Arvenash said politely.

“The Physician is not available at the moment.” The young woman replied keeping her eyes on the glowing board.

Kalaris slammed the desk so hard that one of its stands broke, “Bring me that son of a whore before I introduce you to the rats under the city!” He said gazing into the woman’s eyes.

“Right away milord.” The woman answered once she recognized our badges and uniforms.

The physician showed up moments later walking calmly towards us, a tall and thin figure with a pair of glasses made out of pure gold, “Yes?” He asked.

Arvenash put his hand on Kalaris’s chest before he wanted to act shaking his head, “You’ve turned away a baby in need of urgent care sir, we’re here to investigate the matter.” He said gently.

“This is a self sufficient institution sir,” The physician answered calmly moving his

glasses upward with his finger, “I answer to no officer of Zarim as a physician.”

“You swore an oath by the book of law to serve those who need care!” I replied.

Kalaris grabbed him by his white uniform before he started his next sentence, “Listen here you little filth,” He said, “You’re a citizen of Zarim, therefore under my jurisdiction, I don’t care who you think you are but if I hear you turn away another patient for your selfish reasons, I will come back and have you sent to a dungeon so deep under the tree that all you can use your methods on are roaches and bugs, is that understood?!”

“Yes...Yes my lord commander.” The physician replied shaking.

“Good,” Kalaris replied, “Let’s go gentlemen.”

“Oh,” Arvenash said in the stairs, “I cannot forget his face!”

I laughed unwanted, Kalaris laughed after a short hesitation.

“These people don’t understand the worth of politeness Arvenash,” Kalaris said laughing, “That’s where I should play my part.”

“Agreed.” I spoke.

“I have a proposal for the high table.” I told Arvenash after a few steps.

“We should go to the new route to manage the constructions Phlinter.” Arvenash replied.

“I’ll go to the docks if your idea is good enough my friend.” Kalaris said calmer than before.

“Very well,” I replied as we walked, “There is a better way to get rid of corrupt professionals.”

“Which is?” Arvenash asked gently.

“If we build a central hospital with lower fees, the people will not need the physicians care or his skills no longer.” I replied.

“That’s much better than the solution I had to remove the physician.” Kalaris said with wide eyes.

“How would we get the high table’s approval for such a big project?” Arvenash asked impressed by the idea.

“Simple,” I replied, “We give them one fifth of every procedure that takes place in the hospital of Zarim, that way they will not only grant us the required permissions but help in the process to collect their profits sooner.”

“That’s genius,” Kalaris replied, “I’m going to the docks.”

“Let’s go share this proposition with the high table members Phlintar.” Arvenash said tapping on my shoulder.

We started walking while Kalaris summoned two soldiers to accompany him to the docks.

The city was starting to wake up later than ever exhausted from the well deserved celebration they had last night, carts already started rolling making sale in the streets.

“Fresh fish,” One called while the other sold herbs and fruit, shafts were opening early for the people to gather what they need for a hard labor at the docks.

At last, we made it to the gates of the fortress shining golden in the light of the pale disk watching over our every move without judgment.

The gates opened as a guard called, “Steward and the counsellor at the gates!” loud enough for every working ear to collect.

Arvenash and I walked through the gates
thanking the guards at the entrance.

The maze inside was darker than ever leading
to even darker chambers behind every stone
wall covered in iron ore and artificial torches
shined white light on the inner walls as we
walked toward the doors of the high table.

The gates to the high table opened wide as
the rocks shined on them replicating the day
light inside the walls with their beauty.

Inside the woman with the dark and grey
dress stood up among the five members as
we walked in, “You brought a report on an
urgent matter gentlemen?” She asked in a

calmest voice I've ever heard in my entire lifetime.

"No, your highness," I replied, "I come before you with an offer for the benefit of the city."

"And the people of the city?" She asked playfully.

"Of course," I replied, "The city is nothing without its people."

"Excellent young counsellor," She said, "Come forward."

"I come before you today to propose a central hospital for the benefit of all," I said, "A city so vast should not possess a single physician with limited time."

“Continue.” The woman said gently.

“The members of the high table shall receive one seventh of every procedure performed in this hospital,” I replied, “This is an opportunity for the high table to make a fair amount of passive coin weekly delivered for the benefit of the people.”

“One sixth,” The woman replied.

“One fifth and the access to the forbidden tech in the fortress for better healthcare and the benefit of our people.” I replied.

The members of the high table looked at each other nodding, “Agreed,” The woman replied after a moment, “You may begin

constructions at once using all the technology you need from the fortress.”

“Excellent.” Arvenash replied.

“You may be excused if there are no other matters you would like to discuss.” The woman said.

We bowed and walked out of the gates after we heard the verdict.

“You’re getting better at this every day.”

Arvenash said patting my back.

“I learned from the best in Zarim.” I replied.

We walked out of the fortress gates making our way to the new route to see our accomplishments.

The pale disk has fully claimed the city as we walk in the time of the afternoon, almost everything is covered in golden cover at this time of the day.

The city has gathered itself from the celebration of last night as we walk towards the docks, everything speaks of order in the streets.

We walk in peace once we get closer every step to the docks, Arvenash tucked his hands behind his back.

“What occupies your mind?” I asked.

“The fate of the king’s son concerns me, Phlinter.” He replied.

“Come,” I said softly, “We have much to do for the rest of the day, we shall twist his fate when the time is right.”

The granary is almost taking shape as we approach, Kalaris is in the heart of the labor with rolled up sleeves, sand all over his armor and his badge like it means nothing to him.

He started running at us as soon as he saw us approach, “So?” He spoke.

“Our negotiator got a better deal for us.” Arvenash replied.

“Gather around people!” Kalaris shouted as soon as he heard Arvenash, “The steward has an announcement to make.”

“Your Counsellor has got an offer of a lifetime for the benefit of our people.” Arvenash said climbing on a rock.

“Benefit of the people!” The people cheered.

Arvenash claimed silence holding his hand up, “We shall need the construction workers and the engineers to start working on a central hospital for the healthcare of our people.” He continued.

“Who has the right to use this hospital for their health care?” Someone asked in the crowd.

“Everyone.” Arvenash replied.

“When do we start building?” A construction worker asked after the cheers settled.

“First light tomorrow.” Arvenash replied.

A wave of people followed us to the city center with their goods at hand ready to sell at the bazar, salt, ink, meat, fish and all sorts of goods Zarim had never had before.

The pale disk started to rest between the mountains by the evening, I went home soon today to end the exhaustion I had sooner.

Lishara opened the door when I knocked, taking the food supplies I brought.

“We start building a hospital first light tomorrow,” I said to her softly, “You will act as the head physician.” I told her.

A curve conquered her face as tears fell down her cheeks...

• Chapter Seven

A sound of a bell far away shakes me from my sleep as the morning light shines across the buildings, decorating them in a golden light.

The pale disk rises behind the fortress climbing its way to the fortress rooftops.

I never knew what those stiff metal bars are at the top of the fortress glowing in the light, maybe that's why royalty calls the fortress, the tree.

I stare at the metal bars while my thoughts claim my consciousness, wondering what

they are up there or what do they do for that matter.

My uncle calls me with a low voice coughing, “Get up.” He says, “We have work to do.”

Lishara is in her corner surrounded by books this time, it’s not common to see her with anything other than a piece of bread or a bottle of oil in her hands.

I sit up watching the morning light dance between her hair strands making beautiful paintings out of every color it can find in the black forest on her head, hiding all she thinks about in her mind.

Outside, Zarim is awake long before I am, carts moving to the bazar are making their

way to the bazar as the metal birds circle under the morning light not sure of their purpose.

My uncle calls me to the desk to show me the adjustments he made in the war map.

I walk to the desk to see what he found between the markings of the map.

“Alright,” He says gently whipping his mouth, “This is a proper place to build a mine site in the heart of the city.” He says pointing to the map.

“How many mine sites do we need to construct in order to cover all our needs?” I ask.

“One,” He replies pushing his glasses closer to his eyes.

“One?” I ask shocked.

“This is the iron minerals site,” He replies pointing on the map dragging his finger across the markings, “This right here will provide copper and this is charcoal here...” he continues.

“So, if we dig here and build a mine, we have access to them all while having an underground city all at once.” I replied pointing to the central point of the map.

“Exactly,” He said impressed, “Keeping minimum penetrations in the heart of the city

will also be safer against potential invasion problems we can face later on.”

“Less weaknesses to cover.” I replied.

“Gather me ten men who can dig,” He says,
“I’ll have it done in a week.”

“Very well,” I said looking at Lishara, “Come on let’s go to the city center.” I told her softly.

“Why do you need me?” She asks.

“The people need you to gather talented people to work in the hospital.” I replied.

“Oh,” She says wearing a coat, “Then let’s get going.”

The door opens to a bright day light giving warmth to the city while the people are

already on their way to the city center to manage their stalls, with the granary and the stalls at the docks and the increasing fishing party and merchants, almost all the people have a full day ahead of them.

“You’ve done a remarkable job here.” Lishara says.

“We will do much more with your help.” I reply softly taking her hand.

Some of the people nod to us, some wave, some offer drinks along the way.

We walk as if the pale disk is guiding us towards a day of change for the city and for the first time in a long while, the change actually benefits us all.

Arvenash greets us with open arms in the city center, “Come,” He says, “Look at the hospital foundations.”

“The head physician’s opinion matters most,” I said pointing to Lishara.

“Aw,” Arvenash says politely, “I see we already decided the staff.”

“Well, she will pick wardens and herb maidens for the city hospital today and we’ll have a capable staff to care for the city’s health.” I replied.

“I see,” Arvenash says, “People of Zarim!” He shouts gathering attention.

Heads turn toward us, some leave their tools and join, some abdicate their stalls to hear the steward speak, some forget they placed coins for a purchase and follow.

“All those who possess the knowledge of the body shall report to lady Lishara at once,” He says with a loud voice cutting the whispers of the people.

“Lady Lishara will act as our head physician of the city and all those capable of assisting her shall henceforth have an occupation in the city hospital with handsome payments as wardens and herb maidens of the city.”

Arvenash continues.

People gather around Lishara, “Who qualifies for the role?” A young woman asks.

“All those who know the slightest thing about human body shall be qualified and trained, everyone is welcome to join the hospital staff.” Lishara replies with a comfortable voice.

“A word?” I tell Arvenash once the people surround Lishara to join the hospital staff.

“Yes, my friend.” He replies gently with a smile.

“My uncle has discovered a remarkable mining site in the heart of the city,” I say, “We can offer this to the high table and start constructions immediately.”

“If we need the city to gather all she needs we have to build more than four mines in the city Phlinter,” He says laying his hand on my shoulder, “That might not be a wise decision for the foundation of the city.”

“That’s exactly why I shared the idea my friend,” I replied, “My uncle found a way to build one mine site at the surface and tunnel through all the minerals we need, that way we don’t have multiple fractures in the city.”

“That’s a fascinating idea,” Arvenash replies, “We shall discuss this as a team at the evening.”

I nod watching people rushing toward Lishara to see if they qualify to join the hospital staff,

many were already picked aside ready to carry on with their training as wardens, many already started testing the tools the fortress sent to the site claiming they're for the herb hands to assist in surgeries, some picked the books offered to bring back to their residence and read.

“Walk with me,” Arvenash says gently wearing his smile bright under the morning light.

“Who knew this city had so much potential for growth.” I said smiling.

“You and I,” Arvenash replied softly, “Let’s go to the docks to see how the commander is holding up.”

I nod slowly, “Lead the way steward of Zarim.”

I speak.

By the mid morning, all of Zarim is alive.

Everyone is on a task at every corner of the city, together we aim for greatness in this city and together everything is possible this life has proven to me.

A hawk screams while grabbing a rat from the dried grass on a hill right next to us on our way to the new route, wild life has found a way to follow the city of the living once more after decades.

With the metal birds less active, the birds now rule the skies as they should.

Hopping around and singing songs their parents taught them to perform over generations of wings freely flitching under the golden light of the pale disk.

At last, the long walk comes to an end once our eyes lock on the newly built granary and the stalls decorating it, some sell drinks to the workers whipping their sweat in the heat, some offer dried meat to the people they thought they would only fit in the mouths of the royalty.

Kalaris approaches with a patrol of soldiers, “Everything is going according to the plan.” He speaks.

“Excellent commander,” Arvenash says
cleaning the sand in his eye, “Will you give us
the honor of joining us?”

“Happy to,” Kalaris says, “What’s the
matter?”

“My uncle has found a way to gather minerals
from the heart of the city, this way we can
save coins.” I speak.

“Wonderful,” Kalaris says in a soft tone, “Do
you need men to work?”

“It will be amazing if you could gather ten men
to accompany my uncle in the construction of
the mine site.” I reply.

“Ten won’t do,” Arvenash says, “Make it thirty men.”

“I will gather hard workers but we need promises to keep the motivations high.”

Kalaris says.

“They will be paid in full and henceforth work as miners of the city.” I told Kalaris gently.

“Very well then, do we begin constructions?”

Kalaris says.

“After we plan everything as a team,”

Arvenash says, “Come, let’s go to plan with the old soldier.”

Kalaris nods and starts walking.

The journey is short under the bronze light beams now dominating Zarim's surface, decorating them with a color so difficult to describe with words.

The metal birds are circling around our heads like vultures planning a fall of an animal so they could feed.

The staircase of my residence is decorated with a carpet of orange light as we approach, the door opens before we knock, behind the desk, my uncle rests motionless, his right hand hangs from the side of his wheel chair as his head is fully down.

I can't find a movement in his chest area as we approach the desk, the map opened wide

in front of him, chalks and strings spilled over the place.

Arvenash meets my gaze with a sadness in his eyes, Kalaris takes his helmet off...

And at that moment, my uncle coughs himself of sleep again looking around shocked.

I release a long held breath, Arvenash exhales in relief, Kalaris sighs.

“You scared us,” I said softly.

“Oh,” My uncle replies, “I’m still here, unfortunately for all those who wished otherwise.”

The sound of our laughter echoes in the house all of a sudden, “Good to have you around commander.” Kalaris salutes, “At ease soldier.” My uncle replies.

“We disturb you to see your plans for the mine site commander.” Arvenash said.

“Come forward boys,” He replies, “Let me share my vision.”

He explains the mine site’s location and the benefits of it in terms of making profit and winning a strategic advantage in the time of need.

“That’s a brilliant idea commander,” Arvenash says, “When do we start constructions?”

“Gather me ten men and I’ll start digging tonight.” He says.

“I’ll be here with thirty hard working men at dawn.” Kalaris replies.

“Perfect,” My uncle says roughly, “Always knew you were the right man for the job soldier.”

Kalaris salutes and gets ready to leave.

“Why don’t you guys stay for the night and we can discuss details over a glass of wine.” I say loud enough to shake the room.

“I can use some wine,” My uncle replies,
“Gather around boys.”

We drink and talk for hours until Lishara finds her way back home with pleasant news of the progress in the hospital.

“Hospital is nearly ready for its task,” She says opening the door to meet all of us shocked.

“But we started constructions recently.” I said looking at her.

“It’s fascinating what those forbidden machines can do in hours.” She replied.

“I had no idea anything could be built this fast.” Arvenash said laughing.

We shared the room singing and laughing as
the night drowned the city in darkness, but
the lunar silver shined brighter than ever.

The night settled in the city to prepare us for a
better tomorrow.

The city wore hope for the first time in years,
the people were well fed, every corner
occupied a job and the city was ready to build
its way to something beyond a rock floating in
the middle of the sea.

• Chapter Eight

I was already awake when the pale disk shined in the sky this morning.

The pale disk rises high, turning stone into bronze and bronze into gold as it watched over us all without judgment.

Kalaris, Arvenash and my uncle were behind the desk discussing the vision we had for a central mine in the heart of the city.

Lishara was already up wearing her coat, getting ready to train the wardens and set the hospital tools for its first official day of work.

“Well,” Arvenash said with a soft tone, “Let’s get to work.”

We walked out of the door into the pale light towards where the mine site was planned to be constructed, the people were on their way to their places of work.

“I’ll go to the city center to gather working men to get started,” Kalaris said once we reached the streets leading to the city center.

“Me and Phlintar will go to the high table to get the high table’s permission,” Arvenash spoke, “Nothing keeps moving without their approval.”

I nodded slowly, “Lead the way.” I told Arvenash.”

“And we have matters to attend to at the city hospital so we will be on our way there.”

Lishara sang with her beautiful voice, “We?!”

My uncle asked shifting in his chair.

“Yes,” Lishara replied, “You and me old soldier.”

So, we departed, each to a task of their own to serve a bigger purpose to complete our vision of the city once so lost that no one believed it could accomplish so much in so little time.

The buildings stood tall in the city of Zarim, all beautiful in their own unique way.

Some were decorated in stone, shining bronze under the morning light, some in glass

reflecting the pale light back to us, some in metallic bricks shining so bright that you couldn't walk past them during day time.

“How do you think we should prepose the mine site.” Arvenash asked me while a hoard of metal birds flew directly above our heads.

“I know not my friend,” I replied, “You are the negotiator today.”

“What occupies your mind?” Arvenash asked politely.

“We brought change to everything in the city except for within the fortress walls.” I replied.

“Change requires time,” He answered patiently, “The bigger the change the more time required.”

I nodded slowly in agreement.

The fortress walls appeared from a far before we knew it, the metal branches shining gold in the morning light, metal birds circling around its towers more often than before.

It was the only place the metal birds were confident of what they’re doing.

“Steward and the counsellor!” A sharp voice cut through the air, the gates opened wide after the sound settled.

The fortress looked emptier than before today, only two guards at the entrance, one to the right side of the gate and one to the left.

We walked through the gates as they saluted with their spears carving the floor, the blades shined with an artificial energy like lightings.

We continued walking as the gates closed behind us.

Inside, the fortress was asleep.

No artificial lights in the hallways leaving natural light to rule within the corridors, the chambers were more visible with the golden light decorating them.

The rubies on the high table glowed under the golden light giving them a mesmerizing view, the garnets glowed a reddish gold under Arvenash's hand pushing the gate open for us to stand before the high table.

Inside the gates, four seats were empty leaving us to witness their beauty without their masters resting on them, to the left, a dark green chair displayed veins of golden stings stitched to it with a symbol of a sparrow carved on top of it.

Next to it was a chair with no padding, a pure structure of wood painted in dark red with owls carved on its handles.

In the center was the most beautiful chair of them all, a dark statue of obsidian with black cotton paddings with a banner of a raven carved to its header, next to it was a dark brown chair carved out of the heart of a large agate rock with only one handle in the shape of a hawk in pure white color.

And to the far right next to them, a dark blue chair was occupied.

The only member of the high table present at the time being to attend to our proposal.

The only minister present stood up greeting us into his part of the table, she wore a dark blue silk robe with flowers stitched all over it

and in the middle of her chest, a bronze symbol of a blue jay shined in the pale light.

“What brings you to our presence gentlemen?” She asked brushing her light brown hair back from her fragile shoulders.

“An offer to the high table your highness,” Arvenash said unfolding a map on the dark obsidian table, “We have plans to build up a mine site for the city at this location.” He continued pointing on the markings of the map.

“Only one?” the minister asked keeping her eyes on the map.

“That is all that the city requires your highness.” Arvenash replied.

“Hey,” the voice in my head murmured, “it’s time!”

“Time for what?” I replied in my head.

“Think about your surroundings you dull imp!” it said, “None of the ministers cared enough to involve this sad blue bird in whatever it is they’re doing.”

“So?” I asked frustrated.

“So, this is one time opportunity to eliminate one of the high table members once and for all!” the voice answered sharply.

“How?” I asked.

“Let me take over!” it replied, “Very well.” I granted it’s wish.

I approached the table interrupting Arvenash and the minister's slow negotiations over the mine site's construction following the exact directions the voice in my head instructed.

"A word If I may your highness." I said,
"Proceed counsellor." She replied calmly looking up.

"I have a proposal of a lifetime and you are destined to claim it." I said confidently.

"I'm listening," She said eyes widening out of curiosity.

"There are eight veins carving their ways into Zarim's heart," I said pointing dragging my finger across the lines on the map before her,

“Eight major routes each rich with different supplies to offer the city.”

“I know this city better than you,” She replied sharply.

“Then you must know that only one of those routes is rich with gold,” I added, “This one.” I pointed at the map.”

“Yes,” She replied.

“Two of the routes are public,” I said, “The grain and the fish are the majority of their holdings, but gold is different.”

“I know gold is more valuable than anything in the muddy surface we walk on counsellor!” She said almost frustrated.

“The stewards seal can open ways to every
each of those routes as we speak,” I said
softly gazing into her dark brown eyes.

“The point counsellor?” she asked.

“We will grant you full ownership of the
golden route in the south of Zarim,” I replied,
“This is your opportunity to be the starter of a
legacy far beyond any man’s dream for the
blue jay household.”

“In return?” She asked.

“Abdicate your role as the member of the high
table and retire to the richest merchant this
city has known in decades.” I replied with a
comfortable tone.

“And why would I give up a role in history to live a rich life counsellor?” She asked after a long pause.

“It is not the people or the kings who write history your highness,” I said softly, “It’s the wealthy.”

“Fair enough,” She replied, “I need official reassurance of the full claim of the route.”

“Already taken care of,” I said pulling a legal paper from the desk.

A paper for the legal ownership of any part of land that one desires, only legitimate with the signing of the steward was setup before her.

“I would live a far better life as the richest merchant in the city than a minister who slept with a dagger under her pillow for ten years.”

She replied.

Arvenash signed looking at me with disbelief.

“Congratulations,” I said, “I will see to it that your monastery is ready by dawn.”

“Pleasure doing business with you counsellor,” She replied with a smile, signing her resignation paper before our eyes.

“There you have it counsellor,” She said, “I henceforth hold no shares in the high table.”

Giving the paper to me and Arvenash.

He read it with joy in his eyes but yet disbelief of the events he witnessed.

We bowed to her smile as she stood in front of the high table instead of behind it this time.

Not a single word slipped through Arvenash's lips as we walked, the color of his skin was white as snow.

"What's on your mind?" I asked.

"That," he said shaking, "Could've been the death of us."

"Without risk my friend," I replied, "None of what you see before you would've happened."

“Yes,” He replied softly, “But next time you plan to plant our heads on a spear, share it with me and the others first.”

“Understood,” I chuckled.

We walked toward the construction site of the new mine with news no one expected we carried, only to be shocked by a scene so moving I had to look twice.

My uncle was standing.

Working like a younger man shoulder to shoulder with the workers and Kalaris.

A short blanket was wrapped around his waist revealing a set of black metallic legs shining in the light the afternoon saw fit for the city.

We witnessed the scene as Arvenash and I traded looks in a state of shock.

They were digging under the afternoon warmth, laughing and dancing along the way, Kalaris held his pick axe with rolled up sleeves watching the sight so we joined him.

“Magnificent isn’t it?” He asked once he saw us.

“Yes...” I replied shaking my head to wake up.

“Lishara planted the legs on your uncle when she took her to the hospital,” He added, “A set of bionic masterpieces sent to them last night as prototypes for wounded soldiers.”

I tapped Kalaris on the shoulder and said,

“Come, let’s work.”

“Who’s the old man now?!” My uncle laughed looking at us once we got closer.

“We have news of our own.” Arvenash said planting a pick axe into the ground.

“Let’s have it.” Kalaris said digging.

“Phlintar convinced one of the high table members to retire.” Arvenash said.

Kalaris left his pick axe and fell to the ground on his back.

“What?!” He said shocked, “How?!”

“I made her and offer so difficult to refuse,” I said.

“It seems we have a genius in negation.”

Arvenash added.

“Be careful son,” My uncle said digging, “It was your father’s intelligence that got him killed in the war, That and a little heroism is what can be the end of a man.”

“Without risk you would still be in a chair.” I chuckled.

“Oh, you little...” my uncle reacted chasing me.

Everyone laughed as we ran around under the copper light.

We went to the bazar at the evening after wrapping up our work for the day, it's amazing how deep thirty men could dig in hours.

The bazar was as crowded as ever, people shopping the fresh supplies arriving as we did.

“How much?” I asked a vendor.

“I can't charge you counsellor,” He said,

“Please, be my guest.”

“I'm no different than the people,” I said laying the coins on his stall, “You don't see a crown on my head do you?!”

Everyone cheered mixed with laughter that cut through the singing of the birds in the silver light.

Me and my uncle walked home with more than we could carry walking and laughing our way back.

Lishara opened the door before we reached the steps.

I ran to her hugging her as tight as I could.

“Careful,” She said struggling, “My wardens aren’t talented enough to fix my back if you break it.”

“You’re talented enough for all of us.” I spoke.

The night claimed Zarim as we sat behind the desk and ate as much as we could bare, drinking till our vision blurred.

And tomorrow, the city will be a little more beautiful than today...

• Chapter Nine

The morning returns as promised once again.

Light pushes through the smoke rising from a black smith's chimney indicating that no force is strong enough to hide it from the city as long as the pale disk's reign.

I wake to a sound of children playing in the streets, sharing joy and laughter in the happiest stage of a human being's life no matter how long they manage to survive on the muddy globe.

A soft figure cuddles tight under my arm rubbing her leg against mine making it

difficult for me to leave my bed chamber, her fragile fingers lock against mine as it drags my fingers in the forest of black fibers decorating her head.

The wheel chair is there with the blanket on its seat but my eyes can't recognize a figure in it that looks like my uncle.

“How sad for a man's best aid to see him leave so fast after he no longer needs it.” The voice in my head whispers to me.

I squeeze my way out of the bed giving Lishara a kiss on her forehead to insure she knows how much I appreciate her no matter how little I harm my lips to say it.

She hums a song as I dress for my role in the city with her beautiful voice I'm addicted to more and more every day that passes.

I open the doors to face the daylight with my full strength to bring more glory to a home once so robbed of it.

Outside, a cart runs by selling herbs, a black smiths hammer acts as a bell for the city and the stalls are crowded by the people bargaining for more in their baskets.

Arvenash cuts through the crowd walking calmly towards my way, "Come," He says gently, "The high table requires our presence."

I nod and I start walking no questions asked.

Strange that such news does not shake my heart as it did before, funny how a man forgets his most terrifying fears in a matter of days.

“What’s the matter they want to discuss with us?” I ask Arvenash.

“I know not my friend,” He replies, “But the messenger boy didn’t seem afraid nor did he bring the message running.”

“And that’s good news?” I asked.

“A messenger is a reflection of the one who sent the message.” He replies.

People greet us warmly as we make our way to the fortress gates, some nod, some wave as they work, some cheer.

The gates open without announcement this time, the guard at the gate only smiles as we approach “Welcome, back.” He says.

“That was an odd smile.” Arvenash said with a gesture.

“Why so stunned?” I replied, “New skills need practice to master.”

“Indeed.” He says with a smile.

Within the fortress walls, the corridors are decorated with light, bronze paintings across

the stones all making different sights amusing to our eyes.

The metal birds only circle around the fortress now as if they changed sides now, spying on the fortress for the wellbeing of the people of Zarim instead of the other way around.

The gates leading to the high table already wide open as we walk close to them, showing four occupied seats and one left to rot.

“Gentlemen,” The woman in the center said with a dark and grey dress, “Approach.”

We walked closer to the obsidian table, so close that we could hear the members breath.

“It has come to my attention that you have made a deal with one of the members in our absence.” She continues, “We would like to know details.”

“You have always introduced yourselves as merchants rather than ministers, is that correct your highness?” Arvenash answered politely.

“Yes.” The woman nodded.

“We have granted a retirement of a merchant to one of your members and she agreed with our terms.” He continues.

“Such a bold move for a pawn so worthless in the eyes of the fortress.” She replied.

“Perhaps,” I said softly, “But all the citizens of Zarim have the right to make deals and abdicate their roles voluntarily in the stage of agreement.”

“Correct,” The man sitting in the dark brown chair replied, “I would like to consider the deal.”

All the members shifted towards him meeting his gaze, “I have the right to do as it benefits the well being of my household.” He said to them.

The woman in the dark grey dress shook her head in disappointment.

I stepped forward to the table unfolding the map I carried in my book, “There are eight

routes leading to the city.” I told them as I told the woman in the dark blue the other day.

“We have already dealt one of the most profitable routes to the lady of the blue jay household so we might run out of good options.” I continued.

“I will abdicate in return for the route that offers silk,” The member in the dark read said from the far end of the table.

“I will abdicate for the one that holds wool and sheep.” Another member followed shortly after.

Every member got a deal of a life time, all except for one.

The woman in the dark and grey dress of the raven household kept her face buried behind her hands as every other member left to claim their routes.

“What seems to be the problem your highness?” Arvenash asked her while signing the last members paperwork.

“It is a disappointment to see all you know vanish before your eyes in a matter of moments.” She replied.

“The thing you know haven’t perished your highness,” Arvenash replied, “They just changed shape for benefits and profits, like all creatures do.”

She nodded slowly hands still covering her face.

“It’s still not late to make a deal your highness,” I added, “You can live a wealthy life building a legacy free of the fear that comes with this role you hold.”

She looked at me with widened eyes, “Even if that were the case,” She said, “All the best deals are already claimed by others.”

“I admire your battle to keep what you believe in your highness,” I said, “That’s why is saved the best deal for last to appreciate your patience.”

“Proceed,” She said almost whispering.

“One of the routes holds a rich amount of wood,” I said, “A forest so deep that you could harvest wood and sell them for generations.”

“Are you mocking me boy?!” She asked shouting, “What good is wood in comparison to gold and wool, or ink?”

“You see your highness,” I replied, “Without wood, there would be no papers, without papers all of those contracts would’ve been impossible, you’ve lived enough to know promises and words worth, correct?”

“Yes” she replied shortly, “Words and promises are meaningless in the world I live in, only signed papers matter.”

“And all we accomplished in the city,” I continued, “All the foundations, all the stalls , all the boats, would they exist if it wasn’t for wood?”

“No.” she replied.

“Did you ever bargain for the price of diamonds or gold?” I asked.

“All the time.” She answered.

“Do you ever recall bargaining over the price of fire wood or papers or glue for that matter?” I asked softly.

“No,” She replied, “They are not worth the effort.”

“Then you can make a fortune over a material so needed in the city yet so unappreciated.” I said.

“You might be right,” She answered, “Bring me the contract.”

We left the fortress after we delivered the last contract to the last member of the high table, leaving the chairs to catch dust in the empty room that once controlled the city.

“You should’ve been the steward instead of me,” Arvenash said chuckling.

“Cheer up lad,” I said, “You’re doing a fine job.”

The hospital was crawling with people as we walked by it in the evening, matters so small as a splinter were now attended to in the hospital since the fees were so low.

Inside, Lishara was guiding the wardens for the days to come, days that she might be retired as the high table are no matter how hard it is to believe.

“Pull with care.” She says to a warden, “breath when you stitch the wound.” She says to another.

Kalaris and my uncle are almost done with the mine, sixty four capable hands already made their way in harvesting charcoal and iron instead of dust and dirt.

Birds sing along the way once our young
merchants drag their crates and barrels to the
bazar for the highest price to sell.

The people leave for their homes with full
baskets now the highest prices are so low.

We make our way to the homefront together,
me, my uncle and Lishara.

We open the door as the night claims Zarim
once more, all holding a basket of supplies
ready to be uncovered for a feast.

The lunar silver smiles down at us as we go to
bed with full bellies and curved mouths.

The little diamonds dance around it like they
also had a wonderful day in the skies...

• Chapter Ten

Morning light shines its way to Zarim again.

The pale disk rises to above a city once so lost that none of us believed it would climb its way to the era it is today.

Five days had passed since the moment I last opened my book to write down the events for the future generations.

It's my only hope that the future may learn from our mistakes and multiply our success to achieve more than we ever imagined limited by our time, and the only way to make this a possibility is to write a record of where

we went wrong and where we made progress,
no matter how small.

I find the home deserted when I open my eyes
today.

These chances don't occur often but I find
these lonely hours every now and then to
carve our path into the book of Zarim, my only
way to live across the years I will no longer be
around, to teach and to nurture our children
to continue our path or to find a better one for
the benefit of us all.

I write till noon today not leaving the house.

I'm not to blame, I suppose I find this quite amusing to make a record of our path towards glory, or is it the greed be among the living ages after my body expires.

I stood up to walk to the door once I finished writing down all that I could think of at the time being, all our achievements, all the plans we had for the city and all the paths we took to reach so much in so little time.

The pale disk blesses me with warm light once I manage to get out of the door.

My vision goes fully white for a short moment, I panicked in that stage thinking my eyes had left my side at the moment I needed them most.

After a minute a face shows in the void, then another and another...

I released a breath I held during the moment of panic.

The city at its full potential when I just found mine to walk out of the house for the first time today.

In these five days much has been done shoulder to shoulder.

A new school now stands among the buildings of the city center.

It is more magnificent than any other building in the city.

No more than a toddler in its early stages of life but it shines for its purpose not its bricks.

Children shuffled with the elderly to learn for the benefit of the city, or perhaps their own wellbeing.

Children raise their hands to feed their curiosity, older men and women listen in silence with a little guilt that they hadn't learned when the time was right but we all know they're not to blame.

They were also limited by their time not having a solution to it, none of us do really.

Isn't that right?

All we could do is to convince ourselves that we found a way to survive more than we should have, no solution is permanent to a man's greatest enemy.

The ministers have been living life to the fullest once they abdicated a curse they did not know beyond, all in wealthy stages, harvesting in their fields and resting in their monasteries, selling their achievements in the city center like every other man and woman living in the city but slightly different.

We all know those who crave wealth more than any other pleasure in life climb on top of others to see the horizon and weather the people they climb on top are inside or outside

their residence, the result they see is hardly ever satisfying.

A life of running only to look back into emptiness once it's time to claim the meaning of life.

Outside the doors we are all working in our own way.

Arvenash wanders in the city searching for areas to patch for the benefit of others,
Lishara digs deep into human flesh to numb pains that are allies to a man's most feared enemy.

My uncle carves veins in the core of the city to come back with the materials we need to build a better city every day that passes along

with some fifty men working under his
authority.

The people buy and sell, teach and learn, gain
and lose in a city so full of grace.

And inside the doors we search for meaning
in our families.

We bring more into our homes every day to
feed our children, whether its food for the
belly or soul, we claim all we could every day
only to give back to the city in our own ways.

A body is sick if it doesn't give back the things
it consumes to the nature, a city is no
different.

The evening sits fully on Zarim once I make my way to the bazar to buy grain, fish and some herbs for the night that is the most pleasant time of the day spending time with my family.

What more can a man desire, or what else do we even work for in the time of the day?

To share what we earned with our families and witness their joy sharing it.

The city is peaceful today as the night settles.

On my way back, I see a young man in a cloak at the stables walking the horses.

“Isn’t that...” The voice in my lingered.

“Yes,” I replied, “King Kalthaer’s banner hanging from the boy’s belt.”

A hard pump from my heart tells me I should go talk to the boy but, “Let it go,” The voice in my head whispers, “People are free to live in their memories no matter how horrible they are.”

So, I make my way to a gathering of every member of the family at the door step of my residence.

My uncle covered in dirt, Kalaris covered in oil and sand, Ishara covered in a white uniform, I myself am covered in ink and Arvenash covered in regret of all that he could achieve in a full day and he hesitated.

We share the table not to plan the next day
but to feast and to laugh at what the day had
in its sleeves for each of us.

The table is an old wooden one, its surface
cracked and its color faded, like the plan time
has for us all, but I prefer a broken wooden
table full of joy and love to an obsidian
surface of glory dipped in greed and betrayal.

The night claims Zarim as we all go to sleep
dreaming of what adjustments we can make
in the city once the pale disk shows again...