

The Ashes



A novel by Shahriyar Eghdam Shargh

• Chapter One

The pale disk rose over Zarim, pale as ash,
sliding between the mountains with
unyielding precision.

Its light spilled across crumbling rooftops,
fractured domes, and streets worn smooth by
boots, by fire, and by fear.

Twenty years had passed since the day of the
resistance, since the avenues ran with fire
and blood, since men shouted names that no
one now dared speak.

Now the city lay still.

Smoke drifted upward from ruined homes and working chimneys alike, blurring the line between life and ruin.

The disk did not care.

It rose as it always had, watching the fortress first, then the streets, then the people who had learned to move beneath it.

Some called it God, others called it the sun but the city made no distinction.

At the edges of Zarim, a schoolhouse sat still.

Windows were cracked, doors warped, floors swept clean each morning though they never remained so.

Inside, a teacher moved quietly, methodical, arranging the benches already straight.

Every gesture was familiar or perhaps rehearsed and every breath showed his discipline.

Outside, the city resumed its patterns.

Guards moved in pairs, armor polished like mirrors, electric spears humming softly, automatic bows taut and ready.

The city learned obedience long ago after the resistance was neutralized, the mercenaries now called royal guards didn't have much hardship completing their everyday tasks.

A merchant lifted his shutter halfway, then raised it fully with hesitation.

A street vendor arranged wares no one would buy, or perhaps could not afford to.

A salesman whispered praise of the king beneath his breath, rehearsing words that could save a life.

Silence was safer than speech these days.

By midmorning, children arrived.

They walked in small groups, heads lowered, shoes clicking softly on cracked stone.

The old teacher wrote these words on the chalk board with hands that trembled of age:

Arvenash is the king of Zarim and his actions are to protect you from the enemies beyond the city walls.

All that live inside the walls are friends unless they doubt our king, all that live beyond the walls are enemies to us.

Some glanced at the pale disk, seeking guidance from it.

Others chose to obey what they were told.

Through the streets, the city breathed quietly under the light.

The city remembered what it had lived through in these dark years.

At noon, the disk hung high and unblinking.

Patrols crossed paths at precise intervals.

Market squares lay hollow.

Smoke drifted from the fortress, curling dark against pale light.

The teacher ate alone silently, bread and water were all that he had before him in a piece of cloth.

Once the bell sounded again, he rose to teach unconsciously like he had no choice of his own.

Through the afternoon, the city endured itself.

Children were guided along prescribed routes as shops closed early.

Windows shuttered against nothing in particular, faces remained downturned.

Whispers moved through alleyways, too soft to follow.

Fear no longer needed enforcement, it lived in posture, in habit, or perhaps in the way people held their breath.

Shadows grew long as the disk drifted west.

Broken statues and unfinished walls stretched beneath its light.

The fortress caught it last, towers gleaming, gates sealed.

By evening, patrols thickened as the royal guards poured into the city to claim the night,

the people drew inward as soon as they heard the boots shaking the ground.

The old teacher returned to the schoolhouse, closing windows, sweeping floors, setting tomorrow's lessons in order once he saw the children leave in silence.

An owl introduced the city to the night once again, the sound was like a warning this time.

The pale disk sank behind mountains, leaving Zarim beneath a gray veil of torchlight and smoke.

The fortress loomed, dark and permanent above the city, shadows pooled in alleys.

The streets emptied completely.

And yet, in every corner, in every ruined wall,
in every cracked street, the city whispered.
Not names, not faces, not words that could
be heard, but patterns.

Movements remembered, footsteps that once
marched, then faltered.

Obedience that had once been challenged,
then enforced, the memory of defiance that
had shaped the city's bones, lingering just
beneath the gray.

The teacher sat alone, hands on the desk and
eyes facing the city, he had nothing to once
the children left, teaching was all that he ever
knew of himself.

And somewhere, in the silent hum of stone
and shadow.

Zarim itself waited and searched under her
own metal skirt for warmth, for a spark, or
perhaps a fragile branch to grow out the
stones that covered most of the city now that
all was lost without a trace long ago.

Above it all, the silver lunar watched the city
in solitude, hiding her children in the heart of
the sky to keep them safe from what she had
witnessed in these times...

• Chapter Two

The pale disk climbed slowly above the mountains, pale and cold, bathing Zarim in its unyielding light.

It rose the same way it had every morning for twenty years, indifferent to who ruled beneath it, indifferent to who had fallen, indifferent to who still remembered.

Its glow spread across the rooftops first, tracing jagged edges where stone had been shattered and never properly repaired.

It slid down fractured domes and along the narrow streets slick with ash, highlighting every scar the city had earned.

In the early light, the damage looked almost silver, from a distance it could have passed for beauty, up close it was something else.

The city had a fresh arrival today.

He moved quietly along the outer road before entering the tighter arteries of Zarim, a leather bound handbook held tight in his grip.

The cover was worn at the corners, darkened by sweat and travel.

Its pages were filled with maps, observations, notes written in a careful hand, some lines were old, some had been corrected and rewritten.

The city described inside no longer matched the one before him.

He was Lean, quiet and unassuming not anything the city would consider as a threat.

His cloak was plain and dusted from travel.

His boots were practical, not polished.

His hair was cut short enough not to draw attention, if anyone looked too quickly, they would see only another man seeking work or shelter.

But he was no ordinary wanderer.

He took every step like he knew what was beneath his boots.

He entered through a side thoroughfare just as the first patrol passed, timing his movement with their turn at the corner, he did not look directly at them but he did not lower his gaze too much either.

Zarim was gray.

Not only in stone and ash, but in spirit, smoke drifted lazily from ruined chimneys, curling into alleys where shadows clung even under full light.

Some homes showed faint signs of repair,
patched roofs, replaced shutters.

Others stood hollow and open to the sky,
interiors exposed like broken ribs.

Soldiers in polished armor patrolled every
visible street.

Their metal reflected the pale disk in
fractured pieces, automatic bows rested
along reinforced forearms, humming faintly
with contained tension.

Electric spears crackled at their tips, thin arcs
of light dancing with quiet menace.

Citizens adjusted their pace as guards
approached.

No one lingered at corners.

No one dared to laugh loudly as they walked in formation.

Any hesitation was punished instantly.

A glance held too long in the wrong direction could mean questioning and questioning could mean disappearance.

Zarim had learned fear.

Fear had taught obedience better than any mentor through these years.

By mid morning, he had already traced three patrol circuits in his mind.

One patrol curved around the central square, circling the dried fountain before returning toward the fortress gates.

Another swept through the eastern quarter, doubling back at irregular intervals meant to catch the careless.

The third moved along the riverfront, slower but heavier, often accompanied by a reinforcements at a distance.

He watched their boots more than their faces, the boot's rhythm revealed discipline.

He could tell which guards were new by the slight stiffness in their shoulders, the way their grip tightened around spear shafts when civilians passed too close.

The seasoned ones moved differently.

Relaxed but alert, their eyes flicked without turning their heads.

It only took one misstep, one glance held too long and someone vanished without a trace.

He noted it all silently, as though drawing an invisible map across his mind.

Each street layered over the next, each patrol route etched into memory like lines carved into stone.

He paused at a corner near a collapsed marketplace.

The beams there were charred black, though twenty years had dulled the burn.

Broken crates lay half buried in ash and dust.

The stone beneath showed darker patches
where fire once burned hottest.

He stepped closer, crouching.

A merchant had been there once.

He could see it in the layout even without
stalls, the width of the avenue, the spacing
between columns, the remnants of hooks
driven into beams where cloth might have
hung.

He bent down and traced the lines of the
stones with his fingertip.

The surface was uneven, cracked by heat long
ago, he closed his eyes briefly.

He imagined the market alive, voices layered over one another, coins clattering across wood, spices spilling in sunlight, arguments over price and children weaving between legs. A curve formed on his face as he imagined it all carving it all into his memory.

Then erased it immediately because memories like that were dangerous here, not because they were forbidden but because they made comparison possible.

He stood and continued walking.

By noon, he had moved through the eastern quarter, where homes leaned toward each other as if sharing secrets.

Windows were narrow, doors reinforced.

Laundry hung low and colorless, fabric faded
by ash and time.

A Royal Guard turned the corner ahead.

Armor polished to a mirror sheen.

He shifted instantly, stepping into the shadow
of a recessed doorway.

Not hiding, simply adjusting his path.

He watched the guard's movement from the
corner of his eye.

Three steps forward then a pause, a scan left
then to the right before he started walking
once again.

He could predict where the guard would step before the boot touched stone.

He could sense when the bow would hum slightly louder as the internal tension adjusted, it felt almost rehearsed.

He waited exactly two breaths after the guard passed before rejoining the street.

Above him, a child's face appeared briefly in an upper window, then vanished when an adult hand pulled them back.

The young man observed enough with one look, no need to look again.

He found a narrow stairwell along the side of a damaged building and climbed without hesitation.

The rooftop offered a clearer view.

From there he could see the central square.

The fortress gates gleamed in the pale light, iron bands catching brightness against heavy wood.

Towers stretched above the city like rigid fingers. Guards moved in controlled patterns at the base, posture rigid, eyes scanning constantly.

From the rooftop the city seemed quieter than it truly was.

He crouched low and observed.

He noticed things others did not.

A new recruit near the northern entrance shifted weight too often from one foot to the other.

Two veteran soldiers exchanged a glance before turning a corner, a silent confirmation of awareness.

There was a gap in the patrol at the northern entrance lasting perhaps six seconds between rotations.

Six seconds was enough for something small.

Enough for someone prepared.

He made no outward reaction.

He simply stored it.

Every detail was alive in his mind.

Every shadow a potential hiding place.

Every roofline a path.

By mid afternoon he descended toward the riverfront.

The water ran dark and sluggish, reflecting the pale disk in a distorted smear.

Wooden docks extended into the current, some reinforced, others rotting. Chains hung unused, a few boats remained tied in place, sails tattered and sagging.

He walked the length of the docks slowly.

Counting posts one by one.

Measuring distances between patrol passes.

Noting how guards shifted position at the far ends where sightlines narrowed.

Some boats had clearly been abandoned in haste years ago, ropes left half tied, storage compartments warped but intact.

He imagined how they could be used.

How long it would take to untie one under cover of distraction.

How the current would carry it.

Each calculation was quiet.

Invisible and unnoticed.

A faint sound reached him from the direction of the warehouses.

A curse whispered Arvenash's name from
behind a shuttered window.

He froze as he heard it but tried to listen
carefully to define every word.

The word was soft but angry, not loud enough
to carry beyond the wall.

It could have been anyone.

A child repeating something overheard.

A woman exhausted beyond patience.

A man whose anger slipped past discipline.

He allowed himself the smallest smile.

Memory survives no matter how hard you try
to erase it.

By evening, lanterns were lit along the main streets, their glow stretched long shadows over cracked stone.

Smoke drifted across alleyways like slow moving ghosts, thickening as cooking fires were extinguished.

Patrol numbers increased as light faded.

He shifted upward again, climbing to rooftops where movement was less expected.

He crossed narrow spans between buildings with steady balance, avoiding loose tiles, avoiding silhouettes against open sky.

Below him, the hum of machinery and armor continued, electric spears crackled softly in the growing dark.

Automatic bows adjusted tension with quiet mechanical precision.

Even that hum had rhythm.

He paused above the central plaza where the fountain had long since dried.

From above it resembled a scar carved into the center of the square, the stone basin was cracked along one side, paper and ash collected within.

He knelt and set the handbook on a flat section of roof.

He opened it carefully.

The pages contained older maps, drawn before certain buildings had fallen, before others had been rebuilt under occupation.

He traced the lines with his fingertip, adjusting them in his mind.

An alley that once connected to the spice market was now blocked.

A side corridor near the eastern wall had been reinforced, every alley, every abandoned building, every collapsed roof.

He memorized them not as they had been, but as they were now.

He closed the book slowly.

He looked out over the city.

The fortress gates glowed faintly in lantern light and the guards moved in tight formation at their base.

Smoke hovered low over the rooftops.

“Everything is still here.” he whispered to himself unintentionally.

Night settled fully over Zarim.

The pale disk disappeared behind the mountains, leaving the city cloaked in layered darkness broken only by lanterns and the distant glow from the fortress.

The streets were silent on the surface but beneath that silence there was something else, the hum that was made wasn't mechanical it was whispers too low to catch.

Windows that stayed lit slightly longer than permitted.

He gathered the handbook to his chest and slipped it beneath his cloak.

He descended from the rooftop with the same care he had climbed.

He moved toward a narrow alley leading toward the outskirts, timing his steps between patrol rotations.

No one noticed him memorizing what he is seeing before his eyes, comparing it to what it had been in the book he carried carefully.

The city slept but he did not know sleep until he could carve everything into his memory, imagining what it could have become if it all remained as the book wrote.

And somewhere in its quietest corners, beneath ash and discipline and twenty years of forced silence, the city waited for a reason to shout...

• Chapter Three

The pale disk rose over Zarim, pale and unyielding.

Its light spilled across crumbling rooftops and fractured walls, catching on broken glass, scorched stone, and the dull metal of barricades left to rust where they had fallen. Ash darkened streets reflected nothing back. Shadows stretched long through alleys and market squares, sliding slowly over ruins that had not known life in decades.

The city resumed breathing.

Not with noise nor movement but with permission.

The young man walked among it, his pace measured, his posture unremarkable by design.

He did not hurry, he did not linger, his eyes moved constantly, never fixing too long on any one thing. In his grip he held a worn, leatherbound book not cradled, not hidden, but held with purpose.

He had noticed how others carried books here.

Children pressed them tight to their chests, arms wrapped around thin covers as if

knowledge itself were fragile, as if it might be taken the moment their grip loosened.

Some looked over their shoulders while reading, others never opened them at all.

His was different.

His hand wrapped around the spine, firm and steady, like a tool meant to be used, or a weapon meant to be kept ready.

The leather was cracked from age and salt air, the edges softened by years of handling.

It had weight, not just in his hand, but in what it represented.

Every step he took was deliberate and every glance cataloged the city, what had changed, what endured, what felt deliberately erased.

By mid morning, he had more details to add into his hand book as soon as the city grants him alone time with the book he held in his grip, the book was in red leather, seasoned by the ages and the papers within thinned by the times he went through them.

Zarim no longer breathed, it ticked.

At the edge of a narrow street, a man lingered too long in a doorway, just long enough to be noticed. He raised his head, as if reconsidering, as if some late instinct warned him.

There was a sharp crack and then a hum of electricity.

The man vanished into thin air in a moment, no bodies, no traces of blood, only absence.

The young man did not turn his head, he did not slow his step.

In the central square, the fountain lay dry and split, its basin choked with moss and ash.

Stone figures ringed its edge, heroes whose names had been scraped away, their faces worn smooth by time and impact.

Market stalls stood collapsed or burned, their cloth long rotted, their frames blackened and warped.

A woman swept dust from the same patch of stone she had cleared the day before, a child watched her silently.

Children crossed the square in ones and twos, glancing at the young man before hurrying on, some carried books, most did not.

Those who did held the books close.

He tightened his grip on his own.

This booklet was heavier than paper.

More than pages.

It was proof that the city had once made sense.

By noon, he crossed into the eastern quarter, where buildings leaned into one another like tired workers.

Rooftops sagged, alleyways bore scars that never fully healed, scorch marks, collapsed archways, walls rebuilt with mismatched stone.

He climbed a narrow exterior stair and stood above a small square.

Below, soldiers moved in clean formations, armor polished to a blinding sheen.

Their mirrored visors reflected the pale disk, the stone, each other, but never faces.

Most people saw only threat, what he saw
was structure.

A formation adjusted twice before settling.
A glance exchanged, then broken too quickly.
A soldier taking off his helmet to let his hair
catch some wind.

Small inconsistencies but useful ones to his
book.

It was then he heard the voice.

It drifted from a cracked window overlooking a
narrow courtyard, steady and unhurried,
shaping words into open air that had grown
unused to them.

The voice was not blended with fear as the other sounds and voices were in the city, and that caught the young man's attention.

"A city this quiet should not have a voice like that." He whispered to himself.

He moved closer, staying within shadow, careful to approach from an angle that did not place him fully in the open.

The voice halted the moment his foot brushed loose stone.

The old man at the window studied the shape below him.

White hair framed a lined face, beard long and untended.

His eyes were sharp, too sharp for someone who had survived this long by accident.

“Are you a parent?” the old man said.

“No,” the young man replied.

“Do you have a name?”

“I am Nerukhal.”

A fast wind tried to take an old tree with it as if the city remembered that name.

“Mine is zamukhier,” the old man said after a moment. “Does your name have a meaning young man?”

Nerukhal shook his head. “I don’t know, I was named after my father’s uncle. They say he was a warrior and he died as one.”

The old man nodded once, as if storing the information somewhere already crowded.

“And the book?” he asked.

Nerukhal did not answer immediately. He shifted his grip slightly, aware of the way the man’s eyes followed the motion.

“It was written by my father,” he said. “It contains this city.”

The old man’s gaze dropped, not to the pages, but to the cover.

To the faint symbol pressed into the leather.

His brow furrowed.

“I know that mark,” he said slowly.

Nerukhal stiffened. “From where?”

The old man hesitated, his fingers twitched, as if reaching for something just beyond reach.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I saw this somewhere but I can’t remember where.”

The admission unsettled him more than the question.

“You teach here,” Nerukhal said.

“Yes.” The old man replied.

“What good is knowledge in this city?”

Nerukhal asked.

“It is knowledge that keeps the city alive.” The old man answered.

“How?”

The old man studied him more carefully now, measuring posture, grip, the way he stood as if expecting the ground to shift.

“All you see will be gone as these children grow up,” he said.

“Where are these children now?” Nerukhal asked.

The old man paused looking at the closed door for a moment.

“They’ll be here.”

“Where are the older students?” Nerukhal frowned.

The old man smiled.

“They graduated.”

The word settled badly in the air sending a shiver down to the young man's bones.

Nerukhal glanced at the empty courtyard. "I walked half the city today; I didn't see anyone older than me who still remembers how to ask questions."

"It is not yet time to ask questions young man," the old man said.

"And you?" Nerukhal asked, "Why are you still here?"

The old man turned away, toward the bare wall inside the room.

"Someone has to keep this place open," he said.

“For whom?” Nerukhal asked.

The question went unanswered.

By mid afternoon, Nerukhal moved on, leaving the courtyard as quietly as he had entered it.

The city closed behind him, patrols passed while doors remained shut.

At sunset, Zarim burned red and gold beneath the sinking disk, Nerukhal stood atop a low wall and looked toward the fortress, its towers gleamed, its gates remained sealed.

Soldiers below moved like clockwork given shape.

He tightened his grip on the book as he climbed.

He knew these streets, not as they were, but as they had been recorded but nothing was the same.

All that remained of once glorious Zarim was the skeletons of a burned body.

Night fell.

Lanterns flickered to life, stretching shadows across stone and ash, smoke rose slowly, blurring the sky.

Nerukhal found a quiet place and sat alone, the book resting in his hands.

He opened the book to compare some streets.

Zarim slept beneath the pale disk, silent and obedient.

Nerukhal remained awake, holding the past firmly, as if it might still resist being forgotten.

And somewhere behind stone and memory, the city listened.

• Chapter Four

The pale disk rose again over Zarim, and with it came the quiet obedience of the city.

Morning light slipped through smoke and ruin, illuminating streets that no longer remembered laughter.

Stone facades bore the scars of fire and impact, windows bricked shut or shattered and left to gape like blind eyes.

The city did not wake so much as resume.

The young man woke up early to wander around among the ghosts that now roamed the city, heroes who once stood up to

Murzano and the High Table are now shadows painted on the walls never knowing the man they fought against was not the man they believed in to bring change to Zarim.

Murzano now inherited his father's crown and claimed Arvenash's face.

No one ever saw King Arvenash after the events that took the lives of many citizens that day.

Arvenash's name was cursed silently in the city corners every now and then since no one really knew the truth about what was behind those tall walls.

Nerukhal was starving, he hadn't had anything to eat in days since his arrival, so he

made his way to the bazar marked on the old books map to gather some food so that he could feed his hunger.

In the way something caught his eye.

An old man sitting alone in the docks fishing by himself, his left sleeve was tucked in since it contained nothing more than air.

Nerukhal walked slowly towards the old man holding his fishing pole with the only arm he had left, without knowing the reason.

Up close the old man had a long white beard catching the light and his face was scathed to a point it was hard to find his eyes in his face folded by age.

“Do you sell fish?” Nerukhal asked loudly.

But there was no reply, only the sound of the waves that came back empty handed.

The old fisherman seemed to have been there for hours, maybe days but his bucket was empty of fish.

Nerukhal stepped forward and stood next to where he was fishing on his own.

“I haven’t seen someone with dark hair in ages.” The old fisherman coughed after a moment.

“I’m here to buy food sir,” Nerukhal said softly,

“Do you sell?”

The old man shook his bucket with his leg, the empty bucket rolled twice.

“See any fish?” The old man pointed to the bucket.

“Why sit here if you haven’t caught any fish since morning?” Nerukhal asked.

“Since morning?” The old man chuckled, “I’ve been here for weeks!”

“Shouldn’t we leave a task if it has no outcome?” Nerukhal asked.

“Fishing is the only thing I know son.” The old man replied shaking his pole.

Silence claimed the docks for a moment after the old man spoke.

“Where can I buy some food?” Nerukhal asked after a moment.

“You don’t,” The old man replied, “But if there is anything left you can find it in the bazar.”

“Thank you, father.” Nerukhal said out of respect.

The old man raised his head suddenly and looked at him with joy in his eyes and replied with a faint smile that shaped his long white beard as Nerukhal turned away toward the bazar.

In the way, a sparrow sat wet among the dry branches of a dead tree.

It didn't sing nor move, it seemed to choose its end once the tree once home to it had turned into its cage.

Nerukhal walked past the tree to reach two hills, what was left of the bazar showed in between them.

By mid morning, the light was dominant over Zarim, painting the mountains and the ruins of walls.

The shadows on the ruined walls had the shape of the men who walked among these walls as it was written in the book Nerukhal carried around with him.

A crow cried on a rooftop as he made his way passed the hills toward the bazar, the building

was wrecked and barely standing but it was stubborn enough to hold its ground giving a home to the crow.

The bazar was stripped of people, not a single living creature walked in the bazar as Nerukhal stepped in the center.

He thought he had the wrong place at first but he found too many similarities in the book to erase the doubt.

“This is the bazar?” Nerukhal whispered to himself still holding the book open.

He noticed an old man with a shaved head on a chair in one of the stalls, the rest were empty.

The old man was looking directly at the pale disk as he approached.

“Can you help me find some food father?”

Nerukhal asked gently calling him father out of respect.

“Aw,” the old man turned his head half way toward him, “You don’t sound like a soldier but you’re young enough to be one.”

The old man’s eyes weren’t fixed on Nerukhal but he could vividly see that they were pure white with nothing in the center, he was as blind as a bat.

“Yes, father,” Nerukhal answered, “I’m not a soldier but need food.”

“I haven’t heard a voice so polite in decades young man.” The old man murmured, “Here, take all you need and leave before the soldiers see you.”

“I’m not a thief father I will pay in coin,” Nerukhal said placing the coins in the old man’s palm.

“Stealing food is no crime, son” The old man said turning his head directly to the pale disk, “Buying food is.”

The words sent a shiver down the young man’s spine as his hands trembled.

“The royal guards buy all the food for the fortress and spare the left overs to the people,” The old man continued, “Anyone who

can afford to buy will be taken to the king for answers.”

“Thank you, father.” Nerukhal said turning away to leave the area.

The old man nodded toward the pale disk slowly turning westwards.

By the afternoon the city was drowned in the copper light, the ruins shone bronze and copper under the pale disk slowly moving toward the mountains.

The ground moved with the strike of the boots as the royal guards moved outside the fortress gates for their patrols.

Nerukhal knew the time has come to move toward the ruins he rested in by the time the guards conquer the city, so he walked faster when he saw the evening light.

In the way, an old man was dragging a cart with hardship.

This kind of labor wasn't fit for an old man, trembling under the weight of the cart and catching his breath every step he took.

Nerukhal rushed to help risking his own safety, he pushed the back of the cart out of the mud and kept pushing until its rusty wheels rolled on the stone.

The old man didn't even notice him until he saw him tired of the effort he put to the cart.

The old man raised his hat made of straw to thank the young man.

“Don’t you have any children to help you?”

Nerukhal asked catching his breath.

The old man pointed to his own left ear and shook his head, Nerukhal realized the old man was deaf so he bowed and went on his way to the ruins.

He thought about what the old fisherman said earlier, that there are not much people left in the city with dark hair at all.

All the people he saw since morning didn’t have much time left on the muddy globe.

The shadow of a guard was drawn on the wall in front of him as he walked drowned in his thoughts.

He turned away immediately to find another path to the ruins he rested in.

At night fall, Nerukhal finally made it to the ruined building.

He climbed to the top part that was still whole leaving the winter wind outside.

And it was at that moment that a thought came to his mind unlike any other.

“What if my mother was wrong?” a voice in his head lingered.

If all those old men survived the day of the resistance, maybe his father was somewhere in the city waiting to be found.

Night claimed Zarim as the sky threw cotton pieces down to the streets, the wind was colder than ever but somehow, the thought of his father being alive brought hope into Nerukhal's heart and hope kept him warm during the night...

• Chapter Five

Morning came quiet to Zarim today.

The pale disk rose above as the pieces of cotton were still falling generously from the sky above.

A boot struck the ground, then another and another waking Nerukhal for the day.

He found a patrol of soldiers moving in order as he looked down to locate the sound that shook the ground that morning, armors reflecting the pale light on their dark polished surfaces, spears with sparkling blades aiming at the winter sky.

The pale disk hid behind a series of clouds in the sky as the patrol past by almost like it was afraid of them as the rest of the city was.

Patrols were more tense this morning, the metal birds flew faster and in more numbers.

More than Nerukhal could remember since the time of his arrival to a city once home to him.

Something happened in the city of the dead last night to increase such alert.

Nerukhal stood in the dome above the ruins he took shelter that night to protect himself against the ruthless cold that took the lives of whatever that dared to stand up to it at night.

He held the book by its spine, he was not sure if the book was what protected him or if he was the one protecting the book from the wrath of the city he saw beneath his boots.

Patrols kept increasing in numbers as he watched, more and more royal guards joined from every alley every moment that passed, a handful of shining armors joined a patrol from a narrow street then another and another.

The city's surface turned glowing black once the patrols joined together, the stones beneath their boots were no longer visible to Nerukhal's eyes.

All he could see was an army of shadows glowing black approaching the city center

from every corner of the city, sparks of energy shone pale blue as banners of fear.

No windows were open, no people outside their houses, not even birds dared to leave their nests but somehow in that moment, Nerukhal's curiosity got the best of him.

His body trembled of fear but his mind kept pushing, he climbed down the old ruins and made his way into the streets to find out what attracts this much attention in Zarim.

From a lower view, he couldn't see the guards approaching his location but he knew he had moments to feed his mind with the information it craved.

The streets seemed like the day before,
nothing changed as he walked grabbing his
book tightly.

Every street he passed looked exactly the
same so he kept walking.

His senses got sharper every step he took, he
could see behind the cracks, he could notice
the ground shake in one direction or another,
he could even smell fear at some point.

A series of eyes watched him from behind the
glasses, a hand pulled one away from the
window, then another one did the same
screaming at the child watching then another
and another.

The army of shadow kept getting closer but the young man wasn't satisfied with the reasons he made up to make the hunger go away so he could hide somewhere like the rest of the city.

He heard light footsteps behind a wall so he followed the sound without thinking twice, he wasn't after thrill he just needed answers to his question.

What caused the sound vanished in a matter of moments after he heard it but he kept following.

"Maybe it was a rat." he thought to himself for a moment, before he saw a footprint on the mud right under his boot as he followed

blindly even though the city was covered in white.

The footprint was too small compared to his boot, could be a woman or a child.

It was too fast for a heavier person so it had to be a light figure.

When he looked up, he saw words carved in the stone walls, “Mad King Arvenash” One showed in a messy order, “Arvenash King of death” another pronounced.

The streets were covered with hundreds of letters that formed curses to a man the city once believed in.

Then, “Halt!” A harsh voice called from behind.

Time slowed down as Nerukhal froze for a moment.

Then he glanced at a soldier standing in front of a company of four raising his bow to aim it at him.

He ran as fast as his legs could carry him, he ran so fast as the bolt hit the wall that he couldn't slow down to turn to the other alley so he hit the wall hard and slipped on the ground.

Once he looked up and army of darkness approached with an imaginable speed towards him, so he collected himself and

started running the other way as two bolts passed from the side of his head.

The soldiers didn't want to arrest him, they wanted to make an example of him.

The streets turned dark in a matter of moments as so he turned and turned to change direction.

He slipped once more as he saw one of the streets blocked by a series of black chest plates as a bolt cut through the air directly above his nose, if he hadn't slipped, that would have been the end of the young man.

He threw himself toward the next exit as he ran, his lungs cramped in the freezing cold, his legs ached of all that slipping and

gathering himself up to run but there was no other choice.

One of the alley ways showed a doorway opening to a mountain so he ran towards it as both the patrols joined in his pursuit, he noticed a unified darkness chasing him as he looked back.

A bolt cut the cold air in half as it carried his left ear with itself, Nerukhal didn't even get the chance to notice that he lost an ear.

A trail of blood traced a line in the direction he ran as the royal guards followed him.

He ran into the wooden vault without hesitation.

The time was too thin for him to second guess his actions, it was one darkness or another so he chose the one he didn't know what laid within.

He ran blindly into the darkness as the bolts followed.

Outside, the bell rang across Zarim pinning the boots to the ground immediately.

The soldiers stopped but Nerukhal kept running in the dark not knowing what was waiting on the other side.

“The king calls,” One of the royal guards shouted outside, “Regroup and march to the fortress.”

The soldiers marched back toward the fortress at once no questions asked, the young man kept running in the darkness still blind.

At a moment's notice, the ground showed light instead of the way ahead, wooden floor opened a mouth and swallowed him whole as he tried to reach for the sides.

He couldn't, the time slowed, he remembered his mother's face on her death bed making him promise not to set foot on this city of horror but it was too late.

Zarim held him in its core now...

• Chapter Six

Nerukhal awoke to the taste of cold water on his lips and the echo of distant dripping, his head spun, the fall from above still lingering in his limbs.

Around him, the sewers of Zarim flowed silently, canals of slow, dark water tracing paths beneath the city, carrying the debris of centuries in their currents. He lay for a moment, letting the rhythm of the water calm him, until the sound of something else, deliberate, soft, measured footsteps, caught his attention.

He froze.

The footsteps approached steadily. A figure emerged from the shadows, cloaked and hooded, the hem brushing the wet stones.

A long white beard peeked from beneath the hood, the figure stopped a few paces away and extended a hand.

Nerukhal blinked, uncertain if he was imagining this, but something in the presence felt solid and real.

Hesitant, he reached out and grasped the offered hand.

The figure pulled him upright with surprising strength, as he steadied himself, the hood was lowered, revealing the lined face, the

sharp eyes, the unmistakable white hair of the old teacher.

“You... you are the schoolteacher?” Nerukhal asked, awe and disbelief in his voice.

Zamukhier nodded, his eyes calm but piercing. “Welcome to the city of the living, son” he said. “This... is the only part of Zarim that still has a pulse.”

Shock left Nerukhal speechless.

The city above was dead, gray and obedient. Here, beneath the ruins, it somehow managed to breathe.

Slowly, he followed the old teacher through twisting corridors of the underground, the

walls damp with age, the faint light of lanterns revealing mosaics half swallowed by shadows.

Every turn led deeper into a maze of stone arteries that the city above had long forgotten.

At last, Zamukhier paused before a hidden door, nearly invisible against the stone. With a careful touch, he opened it to a room of light.

Inside, Nerukhal saw movement, a pulse he had thought lost.

Young men and women moved among tables stacked with books, scrolls, and laboratory equipment.

Diagrams covered walls;

Mathematical formulas sprawled across boards;

architectural models balanced precariously on benches. It was not just an underground school, it was a sanctuary of knowledge, a city alive with minds unbroken by fear.

“You asked where the graduates go,” Zamukhier said softly. “Here they are.”

Nerukhal’s eyes widened.

He spent a while investigating the wonderland he saw before his eyes, every corner was occupied with a handful of young men and women almost his age discussing the problems of the city and proposing solutions

from the books they went through or the experiments they had at hand.

Every table was covered with a map and books, every wall covered with calculations to reach a solution for a certain problem that the city faced.

One group were discussing the ways to approach the water shortage in the city, another proposed that the old machines polluted the air so they must be removed, another argued that history will demand action from them so that the future is secured.

Nerukhal wondered if the fall ended him as he watched a crowd so alive and civil in a city so dead and violent.

On the surface, chaos approached the walls.

The king sounded the bells for a reason that day, a matter so important that he needed all the troops within fortress walls.

At first, he saw a handful of ships approaching the fortress walls from the sea that had no end behind them, then he saw another row join them then another.

By the time the bell was sounded, the horizon was covered with warships approaching Zarim from behind, Zarim never faced a true adversary in almost a century.

The opposing army was not yet close enough for the fortress to recognize their banner but their discipline showed their ambition.

Murzano gathered the soldiers for a speech.

“I King Arvenash,” He began, “Demand the people of Zarim to fight for me.” He spoke.

“I order you to gather every man and woman from the city and prepare them to face the enemy as the first line.” He continued.

“You want us to arm the people and place them in the front line, your majesty?” One of the royal guards asked.

“You get paid to follow my orders not to question my commands you fool!” Murzano shouted on the royal guard.

The royal guards bowed and gathered in the fortress ground to share responsibilities for every patrol for the day as the city wore the night.

“You go to the city center and gather whoever that can hold a shovel.” An elder royal guard told to one patrol, “You go to the farther end and gather every soul that can bear arms.” He told another under the torch lights.

Zarim drowned in darkness as the ships got closer every time Murzano looked again...

• Chapter Seven

The morning light burst through the hole that led Nerukhal to the heart of the city, an underground civilization of the young choosing to leave the surface to die.

Nerukhal woke to a sound of the graduates discussing again, they seemed to never stop exchanging details and analyzing situations.

He dragged his hand around to find the only thing that he inherited from his family, the leather book he carried around.

He thought to himself that the book may contain useful information for the graduates

between those red leather covers revealing the age the book of Zarim.

His hand met the book on his bedside on a small wooden table almost at the same age of the book, the dark brown color of the table was worn of by the ages it survived and its surface had bumps caused by the moisture in the air under the abandoned mine.

He randomly opened the book for guidance like he often did, to find a wisdom he might have missed although he read the book over and over again several times.

He knew that book more that its own covers.

A page revealed once the covers opened, an old map of the construction site of a mine lead by thirty one miners at the time.

The details and the instructions were simple enough for most to understand, the selected location on the map showed a specified location in order to dig for most resources and maximum room underground giving the mine the city the advantage of having one breaching point from below while offering it the privilege of all the underground resources at once.

Nerukhal studied carefully sitting up.

The map pointed out the location he was currently in, a mine with unimaginable potential of resources.

Once the pale light made it through completely making the artificial lights of this enormous labyrinth useless, the pieces of iron and copper started to shine on the muddy walls that surrounded him.

A maze of wealth right under the city abandoned to rot and collapse on its own.

“Why must a city so desperate of wealth abandon such resources?” He thought to himself quietly looking through the book.

Once he understood that his answer couldn't be found in the book he stood up to search for

a proper answer, around him the graduates were so occupied with their own tasks that they didn't even notice he existed.

He wandered around looking for Zamukhier only to come back to his chamber empty handed, there was no trace of the old teacher anywhere in the hidden room.

Everyone was busy doing their tasks in groups so he didn't find anyone to ask where to find Zamukhier.

A sound of footsteps echoed in the corridors, every head turned to the door to find out who approached.

But the sound stopped right before it got close to the door, the silence haunted the corridors.

Then after a moment, a harsh knock came on the door.

It smacked the door multiple times trying to make its way inside.

Nerukhal stood up and walked to the door to figure out the origins of this haunting sound sending shivers down his spine along with the rest of the graduates, a fragile hand grabbed his sleeve on the way trying to push him back from what he was about to do, once he turned a young girl looked him dead in the eyes

begging him not to take another step but he ignored her and kept walking.

Nerukhal managed to open the door to peek outside for a moment, a young man fell into his arms once light came through the door.

He wore a dark green cloak to hide his face, mud and dust all over it.

Nerukhal grabbed him and brought him inside to take a closer look at him, he was tired and weary of the run but he still had enough energy for a smile.

Once he was seated Nerukhal removed his hood, other graduates stepped back while Nerukhal sat Infront of him.

“We thought you were dead.” One of the graduates said to him.

“I hid at the docks,” The young man in the cloak coughed, “The soldiers didn’t leave until this morning.”

“The guards never leave the docks.” Another added.

“Yes, but this time was different.” The young man whispered again.

“How do you mean?” Nerukhal asked softly.

“When the bell sounds once,” The young man said, “The king summons his royal guards, but I never heard it sound three times in a row.”

“That means all the city must gather around the fortress immediately.” A graduate whispered almost to herself.

“Yes,” the young man replied, “Whatever happened, it must be an urgency.”

On the surface, the pale disk rose over Zarim as they wondered what could cause such a call, the golden light watched over the city as the cold breeze fondled the branches of a dead tree.

Nerukhal could not bear uncertainty so he told the other graduates he wanted to climb to the surface and see what could frighten a king into summoning every soldier behind the fortress walls.

“The streets will be empty,” the girl said.

“When the bell sounds three times, every guard gathers inside the fortress.”

“Then we move unseen,” Nerukhal replied.

Four followed him through the narrow shaft that led from the abandoned mine to the surface. The climb was slow and silent. The air grew colder as they ascended, and the morning light widened above them.

They emerged behind the deserted construction site near the lower quarter of Zarim, the city felt lifeless.

Doors were barred, windows were shuttered and the market stalls stood abandoned with goods left scattered across wooden tables.

No soldiers marched through the streets.

“It truly is empty,” one whispered.

Nerukhal looked toward the hill where the fortress stood with closed gates. The royal standard hung above its highest tower, unmoving in the still air.

“The soldiers won’t abandon the city unless the threat is in the water,” the young man from the docks said suddenly, “If something approaches from the sea, the king would trap his forces between the walls and the harbor.”

Nerukhal turned toward him. “Can we see the sea from the docks?” He asked.

“Yes,” The young man replied.

“Then we must go there.” Nerukhal said softly.

The habit of staying hidden forced them to walk in the narrow alley ways toward the docks, the air grew colder and colder as they got closer to the docks.

A crow called they arrival to the hills once they reached them, they climbed through the muddy way to the docks with difficulty, the way was slippery and cold.

Once they saw the remains of the ships that once traded for Zarim, they knew they made it to the docks, the wooden bridge that was set for the boats to be tied to was now destroyed by the waves, some boats were floating on the

sand instead of the water, their sailors were crabs instead of men.

“What are those?” one of the graduates pointed.

Heads turned to look.

Beyond the outer edge of the harbor, dark shapes spread across the horizon.

At first, they seemed like scattered shadows but as the paled disk rose higher, the shapes sharpened.

A series of battle ships headed directly for the fortress walls from a far, their banner wasn't visible but they could tell they were not

ordinary merchant ships coming to trade, Zarim hadn't had such guests in decades.

"So that is what raised the alarm." Nerukhal whispered to himself.

A bell rang again, twice in a row this time.

"We must head back for the labyrinth." The girl murmured.

They started walking under the afternoon light shining in the harbor, the hills were now crowded with crows and vultures but the city was stripped of soldiers.

The city was so silent that some children dared to play in the streets.

An owl turned its head directly at them as they walked past the hills towards the schoolhouse.

They walked to the abandoned mine again ignoring the main entrance to the labyrinth to avoid any attention, the streets were empty of guards but they didn't want to risk anything.

Once they entered the hole that led Nerukhal to the labyrinth, the city was glowing in silver light of the lunar.

They climbed down one by one helping one another.

The walls inside the abandoned mine glowed of copper and iron ore as they walked toward the hidden door, Zamukhier stood behind the

door as they pushed through but he didn't look as lively as always.

“Come,” The old teacher said barely standing on his feet, “I have news.”

They gathered around a round wooden table to hear the old man speak.

“King Arvenash has ordered the royal guards to gather every soul that could hold a blade at dawn...” Zamukhier coughed and fainted in the middle of his speech.

The graduates carried the old man to a bed where he could rest, his face was pale, his breath was shallow and his hands were trembling as he tried to grab Nerukhal's hand.

“You must rest.” Nerukhal said holding his hand in between his own.

“No, now is not the time to rest.” He spoke trying to sit up.

“I will save them,” Nerukhal replied, “You stay here.”

Zamukhier allowed a faint smile form his long white beard, his eyes widened behind his broken glasses.

The night fully settled on the surface as Nerukhal gathered his courage to go door to door before the royal guards can reach the people within, he knew if he leaves a door behind, the people inside would be victims to

the king's greed and he knew that if that happens, he failed.

He stopped the graduates when they wanted to join, "I will go alone." He said putting his hand on one's shoulder as he opened the door.

He climbed through the hole that led him here in the first place, moved the rubbles aside and stood on the surface of the vault.

He reached for his book to mark a path on the map, but it wasn't there.

He left it inside with the old man in the labyrinth but there was no time to back to pick it up, he already knew all the book had to

offer, he memorized it all, he was the book, he had to be.

The lunar shed silver light on him as he walked outside the vault toward the city, he looked up gazing into its beauty, it gazed on his courage.

“Guide my steps father,” He said looking up,
“For if I fail, Zarim dies.”

And then, he started running...

• Chapter Eight

The lunar light showered Zarim in silver once all the eye could see was the night.

Not a single light burned in Zarim that night, the wind was colder than ever on Nerukhal's face as he ran forward into the darkness that he saw in front of him.

For a moment, he couldn't see a thing before him in the heart of the night, no walls, no hills, only darkness ahead of him but he kept running as he knew what failure would bring.

He knew there was no other choice, he had to succeed tonight.

He kept running until he saw a horrifying figure in the shadows, a tall shadow full of spikes with a pair of yellow eyes fixed on him awaited his arrival, but he didn't dare to turn away.

He knew that fate was far more terrifying than whatever was ahead of him so he ran into it, this was the closest way to the city center.

Once he got to the shadow that blocked his path, Silverlight washed the darkness as if she admired his courage, the shadow unfolded into a tree with a heavy owl sitting on top of it gazing into his eyes with confusion, perhaps it didn't expect such a creature at night but there he was.

A shallow silver path was drawn before him challenging him to walk it, but he chose to keep running.

In the ruins before him now roamed by nothing but darkness, nothing was present except for a crowd of vultures feasting on a dead hound's body, the smell of death lingered in his mind sharpening his senses.

“I will not let the city drown in this stench!” He whispered to himself as he ran through the ruins.

The lunar drew a silver path to the right so he turned that way, he kept running through the narrow alley ways in the dark, there were no

torches, no artificial lights, only the lunar and
him roamed through the streets.

A shadow passed at the end of the alley, he
followed calling it.

But no response came so he kept following it.

He chased the shadow to the city center, to
find a boy smaller than he could've been for
his age catching his breath beside the
wreckage of the fountain.

“Don’t run,” He called in the darkness to the
boy not sure if he was still there.

“You’re not a soldier.” The darkness
whispered to him.

“No,” Nerukhal answered, “I’m a student of Zamukhier.”

A set of eyes widened in the darkness as he looked down at the shadow, “You’re a graduate?” The boy asked.

“Yes,” Nerukhal answered catching his breath, “He wanted me to take the people to him.”

The night replied with a cold breeze that crawled through the bones as the boy remained silent.

Then a voice shattered the silence, “Follow me.”

The silver light shone on the boy's back as he ran away, Nerukhal followed the shadow into the darkness.

In a narrow street that he could barely fit, doors were knocked one by one by a shadow that didn't stop.

A set of eyes watched from behind the glasses, in the darkness.

Then a door opened, another followed once they heard the door creak, then another.

Light came through the doors once they opened one after another in the alley, a man stepped out scratching his chest, a woman opened another door yawning then another and another.

By the time all the doors opened Nerukhal panicked thinking his time was over, he thought that the pale disk rose again announcing the day for a moment, then he looked up and the lunar comforted him with her smile.

“What do you want?!” A man said harshly,
“This is no time to pound a door!” A woman shouted.

“People of Zarim,” Nerukhal called, “I am a student of Zemukhier.”

The sound lightened for a moment, then the crowd started whispering.

Then a slim voice called from the dark,
“Listen!” the boy shouted.

The alley drowned in silence.

“The old teacher wants all of you to gather in the labyrinth he has spent years building.”

Nerukhal called loudly.

The crowd started whispering again.

“Why should we trust this old teacher?” a voice shouted.

“Why bring word at night?” another called.

“Piss off.” Another shouted closing the door.

Then a familiar voice cut the chaos, a rough voice of an old man from a window above Nerukhal’s head.

“Because he knows things you don’t!” The voice shouted into the crowd.

Silence claimed the city for a moment,
Nerukhal looked up but he saw nothing but
the sky.

Then a door opened right next to Nerukhal
revealing the old fisherman in the docks, no
one spoke a single word until he resumed,
“He knows what even he has forgotten.” The
old man continued walking outside.

Nerukhal froze not understanding what the
old man spoke or why the crowd listened to a
fisherman.

One by one the crowd followed the old man
as he walked, “Where to son?” He turned
back asking Nerukhal.

“Straight towards the fountain, then turn left and move past the tree and...” Nerukhal explained before the old man cut his words, “The old mine.” He said smiling.

“Yes,” Nerukhal replied stunned as the old man walked away with the crowd that followed him for a reason he did not understand.

Then a short figure pulled his sleeve in the darkness, “Move!” The boy said running.

Nerukhal followed in the dark as the boy ran faster than he could catch up.

A blind turn to the left, then to the right and then straight forward, he followed the little shadow to the next alley.

Doors were knocked again as the shadow passed standing in the end of the street in the darkness almost invisible to the eyes.

The people came out one by one from their houses, doors opened to light one after another.

“People,” Nerukhal called into the darkness as loud as he could, “The king will send you to your doom first light, I’ve come to offer you life.”

A young girl showed signs to an old man holding her hand as the city drowned In silence again.

The old man showed some signs back to her.

“This is a good man,” the girl shouted to the crowd, “My father says we should listen to him.”

Nerukhal recognized the old laborer as silver light revealed his face, he nodded to the old man.

The old man nodded with a smile holding his daughter’s hand walking outside.

“Where to sir?” The girl asked.

“Back this way into the city center and past the ruins and past the tree.” Nerukhal replied.

The old man raised his finger and then showed signs to the girl as she explained it to him.

“The old mine?” the girl asked.

Nerukhal nodded in agreement to the old man, the old man nodded back to him with a smile again.

So, they walked as the people followed then toward the mine.

“The next street is straight forward Nerukhal,”
The boy in the red leather cloak said to him, “I will guide these people to the mine.”

The boy vanished into the darkness before Nerukhal could ask how knows his name, or thank him for what he had done.

Nerukhal ran into the next destination, there was no time to waste.

He ran through the doors knocking one by one as the boy did and ran back to where he started.

People crawled out of their beds and opened the doors.

“People,” Nerukhal called, “The teacher requires your presence at the old mine!”

No one spoke, eyes just stared at him, then a sitting shadow leaned forward into the silver light.

“Phlinter?!” The shadow called cutting the silence, staring at him with pure white eyes.

It was the blind old merchant at the bazar the other day, Nerukhal froze as he heard that name.

“No,” He said to the old shadow, “Zamukhier.”

“Oh.” The old shadow whispered

Nerukhal froze again, the street drowned in silence once more.

“Come! The old man cut through the silence with a loud voice, “Let’s go to the mine.”

“You know the way?” Nerukhal asked.

“Better than you.” The old man grabbed his hand walking the other way.

The crowd walked in unity behind them silently under the silver light.

The time was short but it was enough not to rush the last crowd he marked in his mind to gather.

The old man walked holding Nerukhal's hand and looking directly at the lunar.

“I fought beside your father in the rebellion.”

The old man whispered pointing his pure white eyes at Nerukhal.

“How can you tell?” Nerukhal asked the old man as they walked past the ruins.

“You have his voice.” The old man smiled.

Nerukhal was lost for words under the silver light as they walked past the tree.

Nerukhal helped the people inside the hole that led to the labyrinth one by one, he jumped inside last.

The corridors were crowded with people, all the graduates were busy with their arrival.

Some determined old scars, some treated their wounds, some spoke to them to comfort them but Nerukhal only had one thing in mind, to find the boy that helped him.

He ran around the corridors searching for his cloak among the crowd but he saw no sign of him.

At last, he found the deaf laborer and his daughter sitting with the oldest graduate, he ran to them.

“Where is the boy?” He asked once he reached the old man’s daughter.

“What boy?!” The girl’s eyes widened.

“The one with the red leather cloak, you couldn’t miss him.”

“There was no boy with us sir,” The girl said softly, “We only had men, women and babies.”

The old man signed to the girl asking what was happening.

He signed back to the girl after he got the answer and pointed to Nerukhal.

“He says darkness can be a man’s best friend,” The girl translated.

Nerukhal was shocked as he was thinking to himself if he imagined the boy all along when another thought rang in his head.

“Zemukhier!” He whispered running to the chamber that held the old teacher.

Once he opened the door, the old man slept peacefully holding the book on his chest.

Once Nerukhal looked closer, the old man’s chest wasn’t moving.

He approached the bedside, his chest tightened of fear.

Once he got close, it was final.

The old man died in his sleep peacefully wearing a faint smile of succession.

Nerukhal reached for the book for guidance, but once he opened it he saw something strange.

The book's last part was completed, no empty pages were left in it.

He skipped the pages to the final page that the book held ignoring the rest still searching for an empty page in disbelief.

But once he reached the final page he stopped to read.

“My dearest son,” It wrote, “I remember now, I remember you cradled in your mother's arms as I kissed you good bye.”

Nerukhal collapsed in tears while reading the line.

“Perhaps it was your mother’s beauty carved somewhere deep in my memory that prevented me from loving another woman in all these years of amnesia, but a father can never replace his child.”

Nerukhal’s tears blocked his vision.

“I ask you to honor memory, for I blame myself now of forgetting your trace not the machine that forced this fate on me, but now that I remembered, now that you grew into the good man I knew you would become, I shall never let anything strip my memory of you again...”

And the letters stopped there.

Dawn broke over Zarim as Nerukhal held the book soaked by his tears by Phlintar's bedside, knowing for certain that this time he couldn't find him anywhere in the muddy globe no matter how far he travels...

• Chapter Nine

The pale disk appears glowing orange at the horizon, floating on the sea guiding the ships from behind with bright orange beams of light that washed the darkness of the day turning it livid.

At first, the orange lighted hustled three battle ships toward the fortress hauling themselves on the sea.

Formed as a triangle, the lead warship floated a step closer to the city than the others.

On deck of the lead ship a man stood upon the prow, one knee planted on the carved

timber, one hand braced upon it as he leaned into the wind.

He had a long grey hair and a short grey beard blowing in the wind that the sea led his was, the white strands of his hair glowed reddish orange as the pale disk kept its focus fixed on him wondering who he is.

The warrior standing on deck staring at Zarim from a far was king Khurashon of Artamur, his armor bore scars and dents obtained by years of war Khurashon suffered defending Artamur.

He was a nothing more than a soldier when Marukhal of Urkashur gathered thousands of troops at Artamur's gates, he was no prince

nor a commander but he gathered the forces to stand when the old king Eramushar of Artamur abandoned the city with his commanders, thinking he could seek shelter elsewhere while the city burned to the ground but they were captured and killed by Marukhal's troops short after the run.

In that day, all hope was lost, half the city was invaded and the troops retreated towards the docks as the pale disk looked away.

Khurashon was a storm that day, cutting through the opposing troops to save as many people as he possibly could, leading them to the docks through narrow alley ways as he

held the troops back with the help of a handful of men.

By the time the evening approached Artamur, all that remained of its populations gathered in the docks that day waiting for the opposing army to reach the last survivors of the attack.

It was at that moment that Khurashon refused fate's hand, he united the people with what remained of the troops and fought back, they used their knowledge of the city to set traps and defeat the invading army making them retreat, half the city was lost but the all the living were safe and that was all that mattered to Khurason.

The people of Artamur crowned him king that day for his bravery.

The memories of that day haunted his dreams, he never slept long, the nightmares wouldn't let him.

He never changed his armor since that day, he wore the same armor to every battle.

Artamur was a smaller city compared to Zarim, it didn't have the blessings of Zarim.

Unlike Zarim, Artamur was surrounded by land, exposed to eight other cities that were once territory of Artamur but not only gained their independence but they were in constant effort to conquered the city for their own but

they none succeeded over the years with Khurashon's defense of the city.

And now, for the first time in his fifteen years of wearing the crown, Khurashon attacked another city instead of defending his own.

A week ago, the royal guards of Zarim set sail towards Artamur's shores and found a couple of merchant ships trading openly in the water near the shore, they didn't go to trade or fish, they didn't know how to.

They wanted to have fun abusing their power like they did inside the city, they set sail as soon as they found the city dried of riches to raid or women to abuse so they found a new hobby.

They raided the merchant ships and threw the crew into the open sea, granting the sharks a feast.

Zarim lost its sense of fear since it hadn't seen the clash of swords for almost a century, the city never experienced war after the cursed war that Phlinter's uncle fought in when he was young.

And when Murzano saw the ships waving Artamur's flags he panicked, he had heard stories of a brave king that didn't let anyone harm his people but he never faced him up close.

Murzano already send the royal guards to gather fighting people from the city, but the city acted faster.

The troops found themselves in an abandoned city once they reached ground level.

“The city is surrounded by the sea,” One of the guards told the others, “There is no way to leave.”

“Yes,” Another said, “They must be here.”

The soldiers moved to gather the people to fight for them, but there was no sign of life in the city.

The streets were empty, the stalls were closed and the windows were shut.

The metal birds reported no sign of the living once they came back from their patrol.

Not a soul wandered in the city as they marched.

Their power meant nothing if no one obeyed them, if no one was present to obey.

The royal guards searched under every rock by the evening to return to the fortress empty handed.

“Where are my troops?!” Murzano shouted towards the royal guards.

“There were no people in the city your majesty.” One of the soldiers dared to speak.

“What?” Murzano shouted shocked.

“There are no peasants in the city.” the soldier repeated.

Murzano was old, as the rest of remains of the old days younger than what Arvenash would've been by now but he looked older than his age, living in dread and doubt folded his skin and painted his hair and beard pure white.

It was like Arvenash's face that he wore to hide behind his legitimacy forced his age on Murzano.

Murzano leaned on the edge of the window watching the army approach by the hour, the pale disk was saying its farewells.

Below the city, the people were safe in the labyrinth but they were concerned of what comes next.

Nerukhal still sat beside his father's bedside although his body was long gone, the graduates buried the old teacher's body at dawn, they didn't risk burning it because it gave away their hiding spot.

Nerukhal read the last chapter of the book in shock, to face a horrifying truth.

“King Arvenash is an imposter called Murzano of house Kalthaer the former ruler of the city.”
It wrote.

Nerukhal read in shock what the only man that knew the truth wrote as he remembered it.

All the dates were accurate, all the people were mentioned in the right place.

This wasn't just a guess, it was a memory bursting through amnesia, the memory of truth.

By night fall, the truth had a voice again,
Nerukhal knew it all.

The city slept underground as the fortress
shivered on the surface, fate walked closer to
Zarim as it held its breath...

• Chapter Ten

Dawn broke on Zarim, spreading orange light across a deserted city.

The streets shone gold, stripped of the population.

The stalls remained closed, the school was abandoned, and silence roamed the streets of Zarim.

Underground, the city was alive as the population walked in the corridors, some found interest in listening to what the graduates discussed, some chose to sit with

their friends and drink or find some other way to pass the time.

Nerukhal was trying to understand what he had just read in the final part of the book he had carried since childhood.

His mother gave it to him as soon as he could read.

He memorized every line, every map, and every person mentioned in it, but what he saw before his eyes was the newest addition to the book.

He could not imagine Murzano occupying power for two decades while all the people cursed Arvenash's name in the shadows whenever they got the chance.

The graduates had been writing the wrong name on the walls all along.

A small stone fell on Nerukhal's head as he was thinking, shattering his thoughts.

On the surface, the warships had reached the land under the cliff that hosted the fortress at dawn.

Khurashon ordered Artamur's troops to set camp on the land they found and gather for tactics.

Within the fortress walls, Murzano commanded six hundred men, all armed and ready for the siege, but he knew these men were not enough to defeat the opposing army. The royal guards were not only low in

numbers, but they also lacked combat skills compared to Artamur's troops.

They were skilled in killing unarmed people, not battle hardened men armed to the teeth.

Zarim's royal guards were shivering to their bones, some spears trembled, making a rapid sound on the ground.

Downhill, the camp was set by midmorning, and Artamur's troops gathered inside to discuss tactics with their king.

"Warriors of Artamur!" Khurashon called.

"King Arvenash of Zarim raided our merchants and robbed them of their lives a week ago while we were defending our city elsewhere."

No one replied, no one spoke.

The campsite was silent.

“Shall we let this pass?” Khurashon roared.

“No!” the troops roared back furiously, raising their weapons.

“Let us bring this coward to justice!”

Khurashon shouted toward the crowd.

The troops roared again, their voices shaking the fortress foundations.

Inside the fortress walls, the royal guards prepared, disappointed of victory.

They knew it in their souls that they did not stand a chance against the army they saw before them.

Even if they had the numbers, they still lacked the skill.

By noon, the siege machines were set and ready to wreck the fortress walls and make way for the troops.

“Hold!” Khurashon said, raising his hand.

“Loose!” he called after a moment, dropping it down.

The sky darkened for a moment.

When the pale disk reappeared, a wall fell.

The rubble rolled down the hill and vanished into thin air on its way down.

“Climb!” Khurashon ordered the troops standing close to a tall ladder.

Hundreds of ladders were set against the wall in a moment, and thousands climbed simultaneously under the rain of arrows and rubble, many fell to their doom but many made it to the walls.

Khurashon cut through the royal guards in the front line, he wielded his sword with precision and skill.

None of the guards stood a chance against a seasoned warrior like him.

“Forward!” he roared, turning back to the troops behind him.

The troops charged forward effortlessly, pushing through the gates and clashing swords with the royal guards, swords clanged

against shields, spears went through ribs.

Pale blue light flashed in the air as the battle resumed.

The air was full of the scent of blood.

The walls were painted red with it.

Artamur's troops poured through the opening they had crafted in the fortress walls.

Khurashon did not take a step back as he moved through the royal guards, and the troops backed him up in the advance toward the towers.

The royal guards reinforced their defense, but it was useless.

They could not slow the troops.

Khurashon kept looking across the field to locate his equivalent, but King Arvenash was nowhere to be found.

“Come down and fight, you coward!”

Khurashon shouted, looking up at the towers.

The sound echoed within the walls.

A sword went through his arm when he was distracted, calling his adversary to the field.

He pushed the royal guard away and placed his sword in the center of his chest, looking directly into his eyes.

The poor lad rolled in the mud with a smile, believing that he had scared the king.

Khurashon moved forward, ignoring his wound.

The troops moved toward the towers.

The last member of the royal guards met his end trying to run from the troops.

None of the royal guards survived that day.

The troops spread around the fortress, looking for King Arvenash in every corner of the maze.

When they stepped into the fortress dungeon, they did not find a king before them, not even a man.

King Arvenash was hiding in the dungeon like a rat, accepting his fate.

Murzano was dragged to Khurashon's feet.

He was silent as he was forced onto his knees before Khurashon.

“My King!” one of the troops called to Khurashon once they managed to open the gates to the city. “You must see this.”

Khurashon’s eyes widened once he saw Zarim so wrecked and dry.

Not a soul was wandering in the city.

The city with so much potential was stripped of life as they walked through it.

“What happened here?” Khurashon whispered to himself.

Ruined buildings sharpened in the evening light as they walked, searching for life.

The trees were dried, and there was no sign of water in the city.

At that moment, a piece of rubble moved on the surface.

A cloaked man climbed out, walking toward Khurashon and his army.

He had Kalaris's courage, Phlinter's knowledge, Lishara's kindness, Arvenash's role, and the uncle's name.

He was Zarim's son, not only Phlinter's.

Nerukhal stepped forward, holding his hands at his sides, he carried no weapons except for his father's book.

One of Khurashon's troops reached for his sword, but the act was cut short when the king stopped him.

"We do not draw a sword on unarmed men," he told the soldier softly.

"Step forward, young man," Khurashon told Nerukhal gently.

Nerukhal stepped close to the king.

"Where are the people?" Khurashon asked.

"I am the people, Your Majesty." Nerukhal answered.

Khurashon pointed to one of his soldiers.

The soldier came back with a chair in a couple of moments.

“Sit,” Khurashon said, pointing to the chair.

“Let us talk.”

Nerukhal sat facing the king.

“I am not here to harm the people,”

Khurashon said, “And my responsibilities
already outweigh me.”

“No man is powerful enough to rule two cities
at once,” Nerukhal said pointing at the book.

“You are a wise man,” Khurashon responded,
“You will act as the steward of the city and as
our ally, the Fourth Lion.”

“The people will choose the caretaker of the
city, Your Majesty.” Nerukhal responded.

“They already have, young man,” Khurashon said. “They chose you the moment you walked toward us.”

“What would you demand of Zarim in return, Your Majesty?” Nerukhal asked.

“I would leave King Arvenash in your custody, and I demand him punished justly,” Khurashon said.

“Murzano,” Nerukhal said.

“What?” Khurashon replied.

“That man is not Arvenash, Your Majesty,” Nerukhal answered, “That man is Murzano of House Kalthaer.”

“Ah,” Khurashon said, “An imposter king would be a proper answer to my questions.”

“What would your second demand be, Your Majesty?” Nerukhal asked.

“I would like open trade between Zarim and Artamur like the old days.” Khurashon replied.

“Very well, Your Majesty,” Nerukhal answered.

“What would you ask next?”

“That would be all, young man,” Khurashon replied. “My duties await in Artamur, we shall be on our way.”

“Won’t you stay for supper?” Nerukhal asked.

“You are a worthy man,” Khurashon replied with a smile, “We will be your guests for the

night if you promise to be our guest soon enough.”

Nerukhal nodded with a smile, showing a sign toward the mine vault.

People started pouring out once they saw the safe signal.

They formed an army behind Nerukhal, facing the army standing behind Khurashon.

“Let the feast begin,” Nerukhal shouted.

The people gathered food and supplies from the fortress for the feast.

Hands dragged the black obsidian table with white veins to the center of the city.

People danced around the fire under the silver light of the Lunar.

As the people danced and ate, Murzano was locked inside the fortress walls, waiting for the trial that called him through the walls.

The night settled as the people shared songs with the soldiers, and the old men danced around the table that had robbed them of the fate they deserved in a city so rich.

Nerukhal sat facing Khurashon.

The two new allies raised their glasses under the silver light of the Lunar as she smiled down on them, encouraging her children to dance toe to toe with the people of Zarim.

And that, was the story of the Battle of A
Dawn On The Ruins.

The day that a fortress of lies and crimes
crumbled at last.

A battle that proved history of the ten realms
that no power stands a chance if their people
were not united with the fortress, and no army
can defend a soil if they keep focus on
suppressing who lived withing the borders
rather than focusing on defending them.

After that day, no realm punished their people
for standing up to the rulers, no army focused
on butchering the innocent people that did so
and no ruler turned the blades inward rather
than out, order came back to the ten realms

once Nerukhal the Just son of Phlintar the counsellor of Zarim took matters into his hands in the heart of the ten realms.

But like every other dark age, the people suffered most of the consequences caused by the actions of the wealthy and the corrupt.

The history book of Linguas recorded that era as a scar and the blade that was locked away so that it may never cut another soul.

Every wound takes time to heal, leaving a scar that reminds you to learn from the mistakes of your past, but beware that some damages are irreversible and some scars never heal.

And yet, no one really knows what history holds secret in the future of any world...