

# The Dry Woods



A novel by Shahriyar Eghdam Shargh

## • Chapter One

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I do not know what it is.

Every morning, a pale disk rises over the eastern plains, spreading light across the towers and streets of Zarim.

Some call it a god, others reject it for its indifference to suffering, but I do not know its nature.

I watch it, tracing its slow path across the sky, wondering at its steadiness, its warmth and its quiet dominion over the city.

Zarim stretches below it like a web of metal and glass, towers glimmering in the pale light,

streets paved with whispering metal that  
hums under the footfalls of the living.

Machines, older than memory, pulse in silent  
corridors beneath the streets.

Some say the machines once obeyed thought  
itself, but now they serve only those who  
understand their secret rhythms.

The city gleams, but its brilliance cannot hide  
hunger, fear, and brittle control all the time.

At the heart of it stands King Kaelthar, no one I  
know has seen him up close.

The people whisper about him, and the  
council of ministers speaks through rumor  
and careful phrasing.

He never leaves the walls of his fortress.

Some say it is caution, some say cowardice,  
but none can say for certain.

The people believe he is the one who keeps  
law in the streets, who restrains the council  
from consuming them entirely.

And so, they worship him, giving their loyalty  
to a figure more imagined than known.

The council, by contrast, is easy to see.  
Ministers fat with gold, clever in intrigue,  
ruthless in extracting wealth, and yet  
obedient to Kaelthar.

Grain, hands, liquidity, they control it all.

They design all sorts of scheme, but they all answer to King Kalthaer in the end.

I observe their patterns, record their influence, and trace the invisible threads that hold the city together.

The streets beyond the fortress walls the city are dangerous.

Soldiers patrol openly, their eyes are sharp, their swords sharper.

They arrest whoever they desire and take whatever wealth they deem worthy, “The citizen insulted the king.” they simply say, and that is enough to justify brutality, insulting, and looting.

I do not walk among them.

I skirt the edges of the city sometimes,  
gathering what little detail I can in my  
handbook, whatever detail I see fit recording,  
I write down.

I am Phlinter, or at least that is the name the  
city calls me.

I walk the streets carefully, avoiding soldiers,  
listening to whispers, noting contradicts.

I record every detail, every rumor, every half  
truth is valuable to me.

Each note is a small spark of understanding,  
a map of what the city is and how it functions.

I see the fragility beneath the gleaming  
towers, the timber stacked high beneath the  
polish of the magnificent structures and the  
ruthless laws that holds it all intact.

I see the people's worship, the ministers'  
greed and the soldiers' cruelty.

I see the fortress at the edge, the unseen king,  
and I wonder, where are all the invisible  
threads that keep it all together.

And above it all, the pale disk moves slowly  
across the sky, steady and indifferent.

I watch it, and I wonder if the city's brilliance  
will last, or if it waits only for a spark.

By midmorning, the disk hangs higher,  
bleaching what little color the city still  
pretends to own.

The bazaar swells beneath it, canvas awnings  
sagging like tired wings over narrow streets.

Heat presses down, trapping the smells of oil,  
sweat, spice, and rotting waste.

Beneath it all, the whispering metal hums  
softly, as if the ground itself is listening.

I am here to buy food.

My uncle's cupboards are nearly bare.

I am restrained, I can only buy broth instead  
of meat, bread if it is cheap enough, and a few  
spoons worth of oil for the times of need.

Nothing indulgent, nothing that wastes coin.

Survival is a calculation made daily in Zarim.

Grain, towers over the street in uneven stacks, sacks stamped with the king's seal.

“By the regulations.” The stamps show.

The sacks are smaller than they were last year and everyone knows that in the bazar.

A woman stands at the front of the stall.

She is very thin.

it's not the lean thinness of labor, but the kind that hollows the cheeks and sharpens the eyes, her clothes hang from her frame as if they belong to someone else.

When she breathes, her ribs shift beneath the fabric of her clothes.

Across from her, the vendor leans heavily against his counter, he is wide and well fed, his cheeks glossy with oil and heat, his fingers thick with rings, belly presses against the wood as though claiming it by weight alone.

The woman places her coins down one by one holding her head down.

Carefully and deliberately.

Each clink sounds louder than it should.

The vendor does not move a muscle.

“That’s not enough,” he says after a moment.

She swallows, “It was enough yesterday.”

“It isn’t today.” The vendor called.

She hesitates, then reaches into her pouch and adds another coin.

Her hands shake as she sets it down.

He glances at it, “Still short.” He shouts.

She searches the pouch again slowly, knowing it is empty, she places the last coin she owns beside the others.

“It was cheaper yesterday,” she says, quieter this time looking at the vendor.

The vendor’s mouth curls into a slow smile. He leans forward just enough for his shadow to touch her hands.

“Coin isn’t the only way to pay,” he murmurs.

For a moment, the street seems to hold its  
breath.

Her face hardens and color rises into her  
cheeks not of health, but of fury.

“My children are starving,” she screams, “And  
all you can think of is this?!”

Heads turn, conversations thinned.

A soldier stands nearby, chewing on a strip of  
dried meat carelessly.

He does not seem to notice the woman at all.  
his gaze drifts lazily across the crowd,  
measuring distances, exits and eyes.

He checks the street behind him constantly.

No other soldiers are in the bazar today.

He spits to the side and steps forward.

“Give her the food,” he growls.

The vendor stiffens, “She hasn’t paid.”

The soldier reaches into his pocket and flings  
a handful of coins onto the counter.

They scatter, rolling unevenly.

“Let her have what she wants at once, you  
bastard!” He shouts.

The words land heavy in the bazar.

The woman stares at the soldier, stunned.

The vendor’s face flushes with anger, it’s  
unlikely for soldiers to tend to such small  
matters.

The vendor gathers the coins quickly, his fingers moving faster than his pride.

The soldier turns to the woman.

“Take it,” He says, quieter now, “Go to your children.”

She does not hesitate, she gathers the grain and vanishes into the crowd.

Something loosens in my chest, something small and foolish.

“Perhaps humanity hasn’t died just yet.” A strange voice whispers in my head.

The thought barely forms before the soldier’s gaze snaps to me.

My breath catches.

Up close, he looks my age, his face is flushed,  
his jaw clenched, eyes sharp and restless.

He breathes heavily through his nose, loud  
and wild, like a boar scenting danger, there is  
nothing gentle about him.

He stares at me for a long moment.

“Yes, sir?” I say, though he has not spoken.

He snorts and turns away, already bored.

The street exhales and resumes its noise, the  
vendor rearranges his sacks, conversations  
restart, no one speaks of what just happened.

I buy my share after that, my hands shake as I  
count my coins, oil costs more than it should.  
Salt costs more than I can justify.

I cross items off my list as I walk past stalls.

Hope, I realize, is temporary here.

“Like the wind that passes by.” The voice  
inside my head whispers again.

As I leave the bazaar, the streets narrow and  
the noise thins.

the city sheds its performance, walls stain  
with rust, pipes drip steadily.

The hum beneath the road grows louder, less  
controlled at this time of the day.

My uncle lives nearby.

He once served in the king’s armies, not with  
glory or with songs, but long enough to ruin

his lungs and stiffen his hands, when his body failed him, the state forgot him.

Promises they made never existed outside the borders of the papers they were wrote on.

He opens the door slowly when I knock, leaning into the frame.

His eyes brighten when he sees the bread before he sees my face, the frame is lower than most houses.

“You shouldn’t spend so much coin.” he says.

“I didn’t spend that much” I lied.

Inside, the room smells of boiled herbs and old cloth as I unpack the food, I watch the

way he breathes careful, shallow and restrained.

I decided I will take him to the physician this evening to check his condition with a proper expert this morning.

Not the ones who claim to know magical ways to heal him, they only make things worse and waste coin.

A physician who answers to the city, the only one in within the city walls.

The thought brings no comfort at all.

The city has begun to sigh, vendors are closing their shutters, as the stalls rattle softly in the evening wind.

The glow of the pale disk is fading behind the towers, spilling orange and copper over the streets as it passes.

In the alleys, shadows lengthen, and bargains change hands where no one is looking.

I can feel their presence more than see it, the hum of illicit business lingers like a low pulse beneath the quiet.

I push my uncle's wheelchair slowly through the narrowing streets as I walk.

He sits upright, stubborn despite his body's betrayals over the years.

His legs were lost in a battle, fighting under the king's banner, and yet the king's banner did nothing for him or his comrades.

His white beard catches the dying light as his glasses shine briefly as he blinks.

The uniform he wears, stripped of armor but decorated with medals, tells a story.

A tale of service, of loyalty and of sacrifice, but it has earned him nothing in return.

But despite all that effort, no respect, nor any wealth followed the veteran home.

this is the fate of so many soldiers, though few of them realize it when it's too late to escape their fate.

The streets are quieter now, but the quiet is thin and fragile.

A door opens every now and then somewhere and a muted voice calls, a cart rattles, or a shadow moves too quickly.

We pass an alley where the faint shapes of a transaction play out in half light.

Hands exchanging something small, perhaps more important to the receiver than time.

The pale disk tucked itself between the mountains, like a burning coin, yawning on the horizon.

I wonder again why some people worship it.

Yes, it warms the city and it lights the towers,  
but I doubt gods watch innocent people  
suffer under their care and take no action.

My uncle coughs drily, the rattling sound that  
shakes his chest and makes me flinch.

He is very patient with me.

Every few minutes, he speaks slow and  
deliberate, as if weighing every word.

His voice is calm, but it carries the weight of  
memory and understanding.

“See that street over there?” he says, nodding  
toward a narrow alley.

“Used to be a supply route during the war,  
Soldiers marched through it, carrying the

king's banners, I led one of those columns  
once upon a time." He continued.

I glance over looking at the empty street,  
"Was it safer then?" I ask.

He shakes his head slowly, "No, Safer for the  
banners maybe, but the men were never safe  
acting as shields for the city."

We move on slowly, each turn deliberate.

The journey to the doctor's office is long.

Each street corner, each fading shopfront,  
reminds me that life continues even in decay.

We glance at the closed doors of brothel,  
some windows are dark others flicker with  
candles.

Music drifts briefly carried on the wind,  
accompanied by voices that fade too quickly  
to understand.

“Why do they let this happen?” I ask quietly.

“All this corruption?”

My uncle coughs, then answers, “Because no  
one is strong enough to stop them yet, and  
the people cling to small rules and small  
protections, the rest is far too dangerous for  
them.”

The conversation drifts to memories of the old  
city, before the towers, before the whispering  
metal covered streets.

He speaks of loyalty, of comrades, of sacrifices that were forgotten as soon as they were made.

I listen, fascinated.

Every now and then, I ask about the surroundings, about a shadow that passed, a cart abandoned, a flicker in a window.

He answers patiently, eyes sharp behind his glasses, with the same precision he once used on the battlefield.

The pale disk touches the tops of the towers and disappears behind them.

Orange light bathes the city in a final farewell.

My chest tightens.

There is so much beauty here, and yet, that beauty serves no one but those who already have everything under all this rot.

We move slowly, each of the wheels creaks on the whispering metal beneath our feet.

The city seems to breathe around us, silent now, waiting for night to mask its smaller sins.

I wonder how many soldiers are like my uncle, proud yet forgotten, and how many more will only learn the truth when it is too late.

And I wonder too, if the city notices me at all, or if I am simply part of the background, like the whispering metal hum under my boots.

The street narrows further, and a single lamp sways outside a building, painting the walls in warm flickering gold.

Music leaks from behind a curtained doorway, a low sweet tune, accompanied by laughter and the shuffle of feet in a brothel.

My uncle shifts in the wheelchair.

He coughs, the sound rough and dry, then exhales slowly, as if the memory itself is heavy on his shoulders.

“I’ve been here before,” he says, voice quiet.

“Long ago before the war took... everything, before the banners faded and the medals became useless.”

I glance at the curtained doorway, shadows move inside ignoring the outside world.

“They were ... beautiful,” he continues, eyes distant behind the lenses of his glasses.

“And they would do anything for a coin, sometimes it was kindness, sometimes cruelty, sometimes they loved it sometimes they hated it, but the coin always ruled.”

I keep my eyes on him, nodding.

“Seems like coin is only a tool here,” The voice in my head murmured, “A tool to trade offers, friends and favors of all kind.”

The thought formed solid in my mind after the voice finished, I hardly disagreed with it.

Then, in a window set apart from the others, illuminated by a single flickering candle and I lay eyes on her.

The most beautiful figure I have ever seen. Her hair falls like a black waterfall over her shoulders, the curve of her neck and the slope of her shoulders seem sculpted from the night itself.

She leans slightly forward, eyes half closed, and for a moment, the world outside the window vanishes.

My uncle notices my attention to the window. His gaze narrows behind his glasses, “Ah... I see the way you look at her,” he says, voice low, “Do not blame yourself, the gaze of a

young man cannot resist a creature like that,  
Women are majestic creatures, they can  
command the mind of a warrior if they wish  
to, make him think, make him fight, make him  
obey, with nothing but a glance and a smile.”

I do not respond, I'm too startled to speak.

The moment hangs, fragile as glass.

Then, just as her eyes flick downward and  
met mine for the briefest second, she  
panicked and pulled the curtains closed, the  
candlelight disappears.

Darkness swallows her figure at once.

A quiet click follows as the lights behind her window vanish, but the image I had burned into my mind remains.

My uncle coughs drily once, “And so they vanish,” he mutters.

“They always vanish, they know no loyalty, never really yours only temporary.”

I nod silently, trying to carve the memory of her into my mind.

Every movement, every detail, every shadow of light, an imprint, though incomplete.

We move on slowly, as the night deepens with every step forward.

Music drifts faintly from another window, but  
it fades away fast, nothing can distract me  
from that girl tonight.

Shadows stretch across the streets,  
stretching the city's sins along with them.

And in that darkness, I realize that every  
glance, every transaction, every hidden truth  
has weight of its own.

If I am to understand this city, I must learn to  
notice even what vanishes too quickly to  
grasp.

The streets grow darker as we move farther  
from the city center.

Shadows stretch long and thin, clinging to the corners of buildings, the curves of walls, and the outlines of empty carts.

From time to time, a faint clatter of boots echoes down an alley, or an unfamiliar smell of smoke drifts toward us.

The city is alive, but the life it breathes is cunning, so that those who want it buried don't smell the life that remains.

From a distant corner, a caravan moves slowly drawn by two tired beasts.

I see soldiers emerge from the shadows, their boots striking the cobblestones in rhythm.

They surround the caravan with practiced efficiency, cutting off any escape.

A harsh voice demands coin and supplies.

“Disobeying us means treason.” Another soldier adds.

The conductor disagrees.

then one of the soldiers smashes the side of the cart with a club, throwing a sack of goods crashing to the ground.

The people scatter, coins dropping into greedy hands, and the soldiers vanish back into the darkness as quickly as they appeared in the first place.

My uncle coughs at the noise, shaking his head slowly, “The city teaches obedience,” he said, “And fear, mostly fear.”

We pass another alley where the faint shapes of a deal are obvious, hands exchanging a small wrapped package, I notice the details as much as I can.

The city is a teacher tonight, and I am its student, observing every lesson it has to offer. Friends, favors, secrets, everything has a price within the city.

Soon, a sign appears above a wide, clean street, a carved symbol catches the young silver light, an elegant depiction of a wooden cane and two pigeons.

The building behind it is unlike the others, a tall, imposing, and carefully maintained building.

Its façade glows in the silver light, the stone carved with precise care, windows gleaming as if polished hourly, even from this distance I can see why it is revered.

It stands bold, almost arrogant among the surrounding decay.

My uncle wheezes quietly, “This is where they hide the truth,” he mutters, “The knowledge, and the skills, but only for those who can pay not the ones in need.”

The closer we get, the more I notice the subtle details, a brass plaque near the door, intricate iron grates, lanterns hanging from the façade that would illuminate the street at night.

The door is solid, heavy, and well oiled.

Someone enters and leaves without speaking, another hint that the building belongs to rules that are not written, to power that is not questioned.

We cross the threshold, and I feel the temperature shift immediately.

Inside, the air is warmer, cleaner, almost fragrant with herbs and disinfectants.

The walls are painted a soft ivory, tapestries depict distant landscapes, and the floorboards gleam as if polished daily.

It is magnificent, but it is also intimidating, a reminder that wealth and knowledge are privileges, not rights.

The Physician appears.

Tall and erect, with a face sharp as chiseled stone and eyes cruel enough to leave someone to their end without a sense of guilt.

His eyes scan us once, quickly, and I catch the glint of arrogance that underlies every movement.

“Yes?” His tone is clipped.

My uncle shifts, coughs again, and wheezes, but I step forward. “My uncle requires a consultation as soon as possible.”

The physician’s eyes flick to my uncle’s chest, then his legs, then back to mine, “Do you have coin, young man?” he asks flatly.

My stomach tightens as I glance at the few coins I have left from the bazaar, counting them in my mind.

The physician does not wait for an answer.

“No coin, no service,” He speaks again, as if rehearsing a mantra.

“I will not risk my skill on poverty, some patients will die without my intervention and that is their misfortune.” He continues.

My uncle’s cough shakes him, harder this time as his face tightens with exhaustion.

He tries to speak, but the doctor interrupts.

“Coins first,” the doctor says with a soft voice.

“Everything else is irrelevant.”

I glance around, noticing the herb maiden, who hesitates but does not intervene and a young apprentice who watches silently from the corner, knowledge and skill are guarded like treasures here, only accessible to those with the currency to claim them.

And I realize, even here, where hope seems possible, where the building glows like a beacon, the rules of the city still apply.

The disease is not only outside, it is inside the walls, in the very heart of healing.

Rage boils in me as we leave the physician's building as my uncle's wheezing cough shakes his chest again, and the arrogance of that man, that physician, burns in my mind.

Exchanging coins for life and tolerating death.

I step onto the street, needing air, needing the city to remind me that I am still alive.

A figure leans casually against a lamppost a few paces away.

Their posture is showy, but their eyes are sharp and measuring.

“What’s the problem?” the figure asks.

I glance at him, unsure, then let my frustration spill.

“That physician inside, he refuses to treat my uncle’s condition, my uncle is sick, coughing, the man who once fought for this city and this

king now lies in infection and pain and no one cares at all.”

The figure listens, silently, “How many coins do you have?” He speaks after a moment.

“Ten,” I say, clenching my fists, “Ten for the rest of the week, that’s it.”

The figure nods slowly.

“Give it to me,” he said. “I’ll give you something the physician loves more than any amount of coin.”

I snort in disbelief, “Is there anything anyone likes more than money in this forsaken city?”

“Trust me,” the figure says, calm. “I’ll be here when you return, I won’t risk my place of

business for one bargain, I do hundreds of them a day.”

I hesitate only a moment.

Then I slide the ten coins across the small iron railing that separates us from the lamppost.

The figure takes them with one hand and, with the other, hands me a tightly wrapped package, small enough to hide in my coat.

The paper is coarse, the wrapping tight, tied with string as if it holds something precious.

I hurry back to the physician’s door, heart hammering.

The physician raises an eyebrow, “I already told you, no coin, no service, young man.”

I pull the package from my coat and hold it out Infront of the physician’s sharp eyes.

And for the briefest moment, a muscle in his jaw tightens and then he exhales slowly.

“Keep that in your cloth and come in,” he says.

Inside, he treats my uncle with meticulous skill, I watch uneasily.

He examines the coughs, listens to the chest, checks the legs for infection.

Every motion precise and deliberate, the threat of infection seems contained.

For once, the city's cruelty feels paused, if only for a moment.

When my uncle is stable, I help him into the wheelchair.

Outside, the night has deepened, shadows swallowing the street.

The figure from before steps forward, leaning against the lamppost again.

“So?” he asked, with a casual voice.

I exhale, relief and exhaustion washing over me, “Thank you,” I said.

My curiosity rises, uncontrolled,

“What was in the package?” I ask.

The figure smiles, faint, almost cruel,

“Be smart, son,” he said, voice low, “Keep your questions to yourself.”

And then he vanished into the shadows,  
leaving me with a sudden, uneasy  
understanding,

Coin is nothing but a key to the real values.

The night is cool and heavy around us.

Relief washes over me, my uncle’s coughs are better, and the threat of infection in what remains of his legs seems contained.

For the first time in days, I can see a hint of comfort in his pale worn face.

As we move down the quiet street, my thoughts wander back to her, the girl in the

window, the one whose fleeting image burned itself into my mind.

My uncle catches my gaze.

“I know that smile,” He says softly.

“Come on, let’s go.” He continues.

“I have no money left, uncle,” I say.

He waves me forward.

“We’ll figure something out,” he says,

“Come.”

We arrive at the brothel, the music and laughter are subdued now, flickering candlelight spilling through curtained windows.

An older woman greets us as we enter.

“Well, well,” she says with a mischievous grin,  
“you never get old for some fun, old soldier.”

“Good to see you too, Maera,” my uncle  
replies, using a name I recognize from the  
past, “But I’m not here for me, I’m here for my  
niece, Phlinter.”

Maera raises her hands, a devilish smile on  
her lips. “So, which one do you want?”

I do not hesitate, “The one you don’t want  
people to see,” I say, nodding toward the  
isolated window.

Her smile fades, replaced with caution,

“That one... she’s a freak, no one has ever touched her since the day she was brought to me as a worthless slave.”

I bathed her, made her look pretty, but still the damn thing won’t repay her debt.” She continued.

“I’d like to take my chances,” I say.

“It’ll cost you more than the others, if you succeed with her,” she warns.

I start to argue “But I have no more coins left,”

My uncle interrupts, ripping one of his gold medals from his uniform and holding it out,

“A favor for an old soldier?” He spoke.

Maera's eyes light up as she examines the medal as She nods, a grin returning.

“Very well, come on young man.” She leads me to the curtained window.

Inside, the girl was nowhere to be found, but after a few steps in, something flew towards my head.

I step forward carefully. “I don't want to hurt you,” I say gently.

She responds with words I do not understand, a screaming tone that reverberates with fear.

“This place doesn't seem fit for you,” I continue softly. “Do you want to leave with me?”

She hesitates, then nods slowly.

I reach for her hand, and she allows me to guide her to sit on the bed.

Our hands remain connected.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

She hesitates, and turns away.

“I’m Phlinter,” I reply. “Come on.”

I take her hand, leading her to the door.

Maera watches with a knowing grin.

“I see you are a talented young man, like your uncle,” she says.

“I would like to take her with me,” I say.

“She is dead weight to me anyway,” Maera replies, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “The payment was enough.”

We dress her in proper clothes.

Outside, the city is quiet, darker than before, shadows swallowing the streets so the three of us move cautiously, speaking quietly.

She knows little of our language, but enough to understand and respond.

She whispers words foreign to me some times, words I don’t understand.

Halfway home, a group of bandits appear, emerging from the shadows with snarls and raised blades.

“Give me all you have!” the leader demands.

“Please, sir,” I stammer, “we have nothing.”

“So, we’ll take the girl!” he snaps.

She grips my arm tightly.

I step in front of the wheelchair, shielding her.

“No.” I shouted.

The bandits pull out their blades, I make a fist, ready for whatever comes next.

A loud voice cuts through the night, “Be about your way, or face the wrath of the king!”

The bandits freeze.

Then, they scatter into the shadows.

The soldier from the bazaar steps forward, the same one who saved the woman earlier.

His presence is commanding, his gaze sharp.

I exhale, relief flooding me. “Thank you... I guess humanity hasn’t died just yet.”

“Guess not,” he replies.

His eyes fall on my uncle’s uniform, recognition dawning, “You taught your son well, Commander,” he says, saluting with his spear, “I expected no less from the man who sacrificed himself to save my father in the Battle of the Cursed Clouds.”

My uncle chuckles softly. “I see your father taught you well, too, warrior and this young

man is not my son, he is my brother's son,  
Phlintar.”

A moment of silence passed by, carried by the  
cold wind.

“So, how is your father now brave man?” My  
uncle continued, tracing the cold wind.

“He was set to rest after the war.” The  
soldier's voice softens.

“But the Green Curse did its work, he did not  
survive more than a week, but he spoke  
often of you, commander.”

My uncle and I placed our fists on our  
 chests as a symbol of sympathy.

“Zarim lost a great man.” My uncle whispered.

“Indeed,” the soldier and I spoke

simultaneously.

“Why did you save that woman at the bazar?”

I asked the soldier after a moment.

“She reminded me of my mother.” He looks  
away briefly.

We exchange nods of gratitude, and we leave  
the soldiers to the night as we move towards  
my uncle’s house.

The girl tugs gently at my hand.

I squeeze her hand.

The night is deep, the city quiet, but the  
weight of what we've seen and done lingers.  
At last, we made it home.

Night settles over the city like a heavy cloak,  
muffling the distant noises of taverns and  
patrols.

The whispering metal beneath the floor hums  
faintly, as if the machines below are  
dreaming.

My uncle sleeps in his chair, wrapped in  
blankets, his breathing shallow but steady.  
The girl sits across the room, knees drawn to  
her chest, watching the shadows move along  
the walls.

A single candle burns between us.

Its flame flickers whenever the wind presses against the shutters, stretching our shadows into strange shapes.

She hasn't spoken since we arrived.

I sit down slowly, careful not to startle her.

"We should sleep soon," I say quietly. "It's been a long day."

She nods, but her eyes stay fixed on me, dark, alert and unreadable.

I take a breath, "Before we rest... I want to know your name."

For a moment, she doesn't move.

Then she tilts her head slightly, as if listening to something only she can hear.

“My name...” she whispers, voice soft as dust,

“It is a thing that changes when spoken.”

I blink, “What does that mean?”

She touches her chest lightly.

“Some call me a curse, some call me a blessing, some call me nothing at all.” Her gaze drifts to the candle flame, “But the wind knows me.”

I wait, hoping she’ll say more.

She doesn’t.

“So, what should I call you?” I ask gently.

She looks at me then, and for a heartbeat, her eyes seem older than the city itself.

“Call me what you wish,” she murmurs.

“Names are cages, I do not fit in cages.”

I nod slowly, “Very well, until you choose a name... I’ll call you ‘Lishara.’”

She accepts this with a small, almost invisible nod.

I try again, “How old are you?”

She closes her eyes, thinking.

When she opens them, the candlelight reflects in her pupils like tiny pale disks at dawn time.

“I have seen seventeen winters,” she says.

Then she shakes her head.

“Or perhaps twenty, or perhaps none at all.”

Her voice softens. “Time does not follow me, it circles around me.”

I frown. “Circles?”

She draws a small shape on the floor with her finger, a loop, imperfect and broken at one end of it.

“Like this,” she whispers. “Always returning, and never complete.”

I don’t understand, but I don’t press her.

I lean back, studying her. “Where are you from?”

This time, her expression changes, her hands curl slightly, as if remembering pain.

“I come from a place where the sky is always listening,” she says.

I wait for her to continue.

“And the ground remembers every footstep,” she continues. “A place where people speak in shadows, not words.”

Her voice trembles, just once.

“It is far from here,” she finishes. “Far from everything.”

I swallow, “Do you want to go back?”

She looks at me sharply, almost frightened.

“No,” she says. “The path behind me is closed a long time ago.”

Her fingers grip the blanket around her shoulders.

“And the path ahead?” I ask softly.

She hesitates.

Then adds quietly, “That depends on you.”

The candle flickers violently, as if reacting to her words.

A draft slips through the shutters, brushing against my skin like a warning.

I shift closer, lowering my voice, “I won’t hurt you.” I said, “You’re safe here.”

She studies me for a long moment, searching my face for something, truth, perhaps, or a weakness.

Finally, she whispers, “Safety is a story people tell to sleep at night.”

Her eyes drift to my uncle, sleeping peacefully.

“But stories can be kind,” she continues. “And I would like to believe yours.”

The room grows quiet again.

The candle burns lower.

Outside, the city exhales a long, tired sigh.

I lie down on the floor beside the wall, pulling a thin blanket over myself.

She remains sitting for a while, watching the flame, watching me, watching the night.

Just before I drift into sleep, I hear her voice,  
barely audible.

“Phlint...”

I open my eyes. “Yes?”

She hesitates, then says,

“Thank you.”

Two simple words, no riddles, no secrets.

Just truth.

The candle finally dies, and darkness settles  
over us like a promise.

## • Chapter Two

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The sound that drags me from sleep this morning is a strange unfamiliar sound, a scorching sound I've never heard before.

It is a sound of whirring.

A thin metallic hum, sharp and almost rhythmic, an unnatural noise that cuts through the peaceful quiet of dawn.

It vibrates through the shutters, through the metal floor and through my bones.

For a moment, I lie still, listening to this unusual sound haunting the city this morning.

Then a sound of faint clicking drags me out of my bed chamber, a sound like talons tapping against wood.

My eyes snap open at that moment.

The girl is already awake.

She sits curled in the corner, blanket wrapped around her shoulders, eyes wide and alert.

She heard it too.

Her gaze flicks toward the window, then to me, then back again.

“Metal birds,” she whispers pointing at the sky.

These words send a chill down my spine.

I rise slowly, careful not to wake my uncle.

His breathing is steady but shallow, he sleeps like a man who has learned to rest only when exhaustion forces him.

The sound of whirring grows louder every now and then without a certain order.

I move to the window and lift the corner of the curtain just enough to see what's outside.

A shadow glides across the street, then another and another.

Small, black shapes drift between the buildings, oval bodies, thin wings that don't flap, glowing red eyes that blink in patterns I don't understand.

They hover, pause, tilt, then dart forward with impossible precision.

The people call them metal birds.

Soldiers call them the King's Eyes.

No one knows what they truly are.

But everyone fears them as do I.

One of them stops directly above the street outside our home, Its wings fold inward and it hangs in the air like a suspended blade.

A thin beam of red light scans the ground beneath it, sweeping slowly across the cobblestones.

I let the curtain fall at once.

Afraid of being noticed by whatever that is.

The girl watches me, her expression unreadable to me, “They’re on a hunt.” she murmurs quietly.

“They seem to gather information,” I say quietly. “Or watch the city.”

She shakes her head. “No, they’re hunting.”

I don’t know what she means, but the certainty in her voice unsettles me.

My uncle stirs in his chair, coughing weakly.

“Are they out again?” he asks, eyes still closed.

“Yes.” I speak.

He sighs, rubbing his temples. “They came earlier every day, the king must be nervous.”

“About what?” I asked.

“About everything,” he mutters. “Fear makes rulers greedy for eyes.”

The whirring shifts direction.

A second creature joins the first, their red lights crossing like threads in a web.

Somewhere down the street, a door slams shut, a woman whispers a prayer and a child finds no other solution than to cry.

The city is awake now, but the people are forced to stay asleep.

They feel watched, measured, or perhaps judged by a council they don't even see before them.

I sit beside my uncle, “Why do people call them metal birds?” I ask of him.

“Because no one knows what they are,” he replies, “And people fear what they do not know, so they named the unknown life forms that crawl out of the fortress after something familiar like a bird.”

“And the King’s Eyes?” I ask.

“That’s what the soldiers call them,” he says.

“Makes them sound loyal, as if the king himself sees through them.”

He coughs again, wincing, “They don’t really see or breath like us, but they have been around far before the Battle of the Cursed Clouds, far before I can recall.”

The girl looks up sharply at that word.

“The Battle of the Cursed Clouds,” she repeats softly.

My uncle nods. “They call it that because the green clouds sometimes appeared during the fight, they killed more soldiers than the opposing side ever could, we never knew if they were magic or a weapon, all I know is no soldier liked the color green after that.”

The girl’s fingers tighten around the blanket. “Weapons,” she whispers shaking herself for comfort as children do, “Weapons.”

A shiver runs through me as I hear her repeat those words over and over like it haunted her soul for some reason.

Outside, the metal birds continue their slow patrol, one of them emits a sharp chirp, like a birdcall but not even close to a real one.

A moment later, a hidden panel on the side of a nearby building flickers to life, a surface like a mirror, thin, cracked and glowing faintly, it displays a symbol of the king's crest.

A harmony of two spears with a crown on top shining gold on a purple background.

A voice crackles through the street, distorted and cold,

“People of Zarim, the king orders you to stay indoors while the soldiers do their morning inspection, cooperation ensures your safety.”

The message repeats twice, then the screen goes dark again.

My uncle shakes his head. “Safety,” He mutters, “A word they use to hide chains.”

The girl rises slowly and walks toward the window, she stops a few steps away, watching the shadows of the metal birds pass over the shutters.

“They are searching,” She murmurs, “For someone.”

I swallow. “Who?”

She turns to me, her eyes dark and distant.

“Perhaps for me.” She whispers.

The room seems to shrink around us.

The sound of the metal birds grows louder,  
closer and more deliberate in my head.

My uncle grips the arm of his chair. “Phlinter,”  
he says quietly, “whoever you brought home  
last night, she isn’t just a normal girl.”

I look at her.

She looks at me.

And in her gaze, I see fear, not of us, not of the  
city, but of something far larger, far more  
dangerous than I could ever be.

The metal birds pass overhead again, their  
red lights sweeping across the shutters like  
searching fingers.

The girl steps back into the shadows.

“Do not let them see me,” she whispers.

And I realize, that the city is watching our every move, waiting for us to make a mistake.

The hum does not leave, it never does.

The metal birds pass as if they are scratching the sky, their whirring sound doesn't stop even after they leave, it remains in the glass and the stones.

I move to the window again.

Across the street, a crooked tree grew where the metallic cobblestone has cracked.

From one of its branches hangs a small iron cage rusty and old.

Inside it, a bird sits motionless.

Its feathers are dirty, dulled by dust and smoke, a shallow dish of seed rests beneath its feet and clean water glints faintly, barely enough to live with.

I notice one of the metal birds pass overhead again.

The bird looks up.

It hops closer to the bars, head tilting as the metal shape glides across the sky.

Its wings twitch once, instinctively, then fold tight against its body, it does not cry out, it only watches an act of habit perhaps.

All the years made him realize there is no way out and struggling is hopeless.

“They are free,” the girl murmurs behind me.

“And the bird is not.”

My uncle shifts in his chair, “At least Its safe,” he says. “That bird eats better than most creatures in this city.”

The metal bird drifts on, red eye blinking once before disappearing behind the towers.

It does not slow nor does it look down.

“At what cost?” I ask.

My uncle exhales slowly. “The world beyond that cage would kill it in no time.”

“Or teach it how to live,” I reply.

The bird presses closer to the iron bars, its feathers brush the cage as another metal bird hums past in the distance.

It watches the empty sky long after the sound fades away.

The girl steps back from the window.

“What should rule the sky is imprisoned,” she whispers. “And what should never have lived rules it.”

The cage sways gently in the wind.

Sleep clings to me longer than it should.

I rub my face, feeling the grit of the city still there.

I turn away from the window and pour some cold water into the basin, I splash it over my face once, then again, steadying myself.

For a moment, I focus only on breathing.

When I return to the window, something is wrong or perhaps different.

The tree across the street is still there, bent and stubborn as ever.

The cage still hangs from its branch.

But the door is open.

It swings slightly in the breeze, tapping softly against iron.

Inside, the small dish of seed remains  
untouched and the water glints faintly in the  
beams of light.

The bird is gone.

I stare longer than I should, searching the sky,  
the street below, the nearby rooftops,  
anywhere my eyes might catch its wings.

Nothing.

My uncle shifts behind me. “What is it?”

“The cage,” I say slowly. “The door is open.”

He exhales. “Wind, maybe, or the bird’s hope  
showed it a way out just enough to slip out.”

I don’t have an answer.

I turn.

The girl sits where she was before, knees drawn close, watching me, not surprised, not uneasy.

“You did this?” I ask quietly.

She nods once.

“When?” I ask.

“While you were at the basin,” she replies.

“I knew you wanted to do it.” She says eyes fixed on mine.

“You could have been captured or hurt.” I replied softly.

“So could you,” she says, “When you stood up for me that night.”

I hesitate, “Why did you open the cage?”

She looks past me, toward the open window.

“You taught me that cages lie,” she says,

“They say they protect, but they only delay  
life.”

The words settle into my mind, heavier than  
they should.

“And if the bird is hunted down?” I ask.

“Then it would have lived free, no matter how  
short.” She replies.

Outside, something moves quickly, light and  
lively, something truly alive, not by force.

Gone before I can be sure of its nature.

The cage sways gently, empty and open.

The hum never stops.

But the city feels slightly less certain of itself.

The pale disk has climbed higher now.

It hangs above Zarim like a bleached coin  
nailed to the sky, steady and unblinking.

Its light spills down the towers and narrow  
streets alike, touching fortress walls and  
cracked stone with the same indifferent hand.

It warms the whispering metal beneath our  
feet, draws steam from gutters and breath  
from sleeping bodies, and asks nothing in  
return, but still, I don't understand how it  
stands indifferent to all that it sees.

I still do not know what it truly is.

From our window, I watch its light creep  
slowly across the opposite wall, step by step,  
as if measuring the city, the way the metal  
birds do but without judgment, it shines light  
on everything without any difference maybe  
that's why some call it a god.

Morning has fully claimed Zarim now.

Whatever the metal birds sought at dawn, the  
day does not pause for it.

My stomach tightens.

Hunger announces itself quietly at first, a dull  
pressure beneath the ribs.

I open the cupboard again, though I already  
know what it will show me.

The shelves are bare in a way that feels deliberate, almost accusatory.

A crust of bread, a smear of oil at the bottom of the jar, dried herbs meant for flavor, not survival.

“Standing here won’t make a difference you know.” The voice in my head whispers.

I exhale through my nose, the voice is not new, it has been with me for as long as I can remember, sharpening thoughts, correcting impulses, warning me when emotion threatens reason, I can hardly argue with it.

I have learned that it’s always speaks the truth no matter how bitter.

My uncle coughs softly behind me, the sound is brittle in the morning air, the girl watches from the corner, her gaze flicking from my hands to the cupboard, then away again.

She does not ask, she already knows.

“I’ll go to the bazaar,” I say.

I feel a sense of danger just by saying it.

Outside, the city has changed its posture.

Doors remain closed longer than usual.

Shutters are half drawn even under the rising light, people move quickly, heads down, conversations cut short.

The disk shines on them all the same,  
illuminating fear as faithfully as it once  
illuminated commerce.

I step into the street.

The whispering metal hums beneath my  
boots, steady and low, like a warning too deep  
to hear properly.

Somewhere above, the metal birds drift, their  
shadows sliding across walls and faces.

They no longer feel like patrols, they feel like  
punctuation.

The bazaar is open, but not in its usual status.

Stalls stand half stocked, half abandoned,  
merchants tense and watchful.

Coin changes hands quickly, without  
bargaining, without words wasted.

No one lingers, The air tastes of restraint.

A patrol rounds the corner.

Soldiers move in practiced lines, boots  
striking the street in perfect rhythm.

Their armor catches the light of the disk, dull  
gold and purple, polished enough to reflect  
authority but never warmth, one of them  
raises his hand.

“Inspection,” he calls. “All the people must  
return to their homes immediately and close  
your doors, this is the King’s order.”

The crowd drowns in silence for a moment.

Then shutters slam, voices die mid sentence,  
and the people scatter with the efficiency of  
those who have learned the cost of delay.

I step forward anyway.

“Sir,” I say, lifting my small pouch of coins, “I  
need to buy food, just enough for the day.”

The soldier’s gaze fixes on me.

“I’m starting to like where this is going.” the  
voice in my head notes.

He does not answer with words.

The blow is sharp and sudden, a strike to the  
shoulder that knocks me back a step and  
sends heat flashing down my arm.

“This is the King’s order!” He says flatly. “Obey or face the consequences!”

There is no anger in his voice, no cruelty, only an unchanging certainty.

I gather what little food I can in the chaos, stale bread, a small measure of grain and retreat as the patrol advances.

The disk watches overhead, pale and patient, illuminating the violence without comment.

As I turn the final corner toward home, a certain movement catches my eye.

The crooked tree solid in the ground.

The cage still hangs from its branch, empty and forgotten but above it, among the higher limbs, the bird flits freely now.

It hops from branch to branch, awkward at first, then surer, wings catching the light as it lifts and joins the others circling the street.

For a moment, the city loosens its grip on my chest.

“Good thing we made it back to see this view”  
the voice in my head chuckled.

I carry that thought with me as I return home with too little food to feed every one, the disk still climbing, the metal birds are still watching, and the day only just beginning.

The basket of food is light in my hands.

Maybe if I put the shame I carry in it, it  
wouldn't feel so empty.

We eat in silence.

Bread, some dried fruit, a splash of oil.

Not enough to fill the belly, only enough to  
make it forget the hunger for a short period of  
time.

The girl watches me from her corner, dark  
eyes studying, learning, cataloging.

My uncle hums softly through his coughs,  
chewing slowly, measuring each bite like it is  
a victory over the city itself.

“I need food in here!” the voice in my head  
lingers.

I chuckle but no one realizes it, the sound is  
perhaps my only true friend.

Afternoon stretches longer than ever.

The disk above hangs high, steady and  
indifferent, it's light filters through cracks in  
the shutters, falling in rectangles across the  
floor, marking the passage of hours.

Outside, the city hums.

Metal birds glide, ever precise.

Soldiers march on empty streets.

Voices cut off abruptly as doors slam.

The girl finally speaks, her voice quiet, low.

“They’re search,” she says. “For someone.”

“I know,” I reply. “The patrol this morning... they seem to follow certain orders, but their eyes look for someone to give them a reason.”

She tilts her head, “Courage is dangerous.”

I glance at the cupboard, empty but for a few scraps. “Hunger is dangerous too,” I say. “And it forces our choices.”

“Choices are always dangerous.”, the voice reminds me.

“But inaction is also a decision.” I reply.

It doesn’t respond.

I spend the afternoon moving through the  
small rooms, checking locks, peering out the  
windows, cataloging the sounds of the city.

The girl follows silently.

My uncle rests in his chair, shrouded in  
blankets, every now and then he coughs but  
the coughs are less severe than before.

Hours pass and hunger grows sharper.

My legs ache from pacing.

The girl curls tighter in her corner.

And still the city hums, a low, constant  
vibration beneath the doors, through the  
walls, threading itself into my skull.

“Get up and study something,” The voice inside my head lingers, “Those machines never stop learning, and then there is you!”

By late afternoon, shadows lengthen.

The disk tilts westward, spilling long fingers of light across the streets, a faint wind moves through the cracks in the shutters, carrying the scent of smoke and iron.

Somewhere, a distant bell clangs.

Somewhere else, a door slams, then silence.

We eat the last of our bread.

Hunger is not desperate yet, but persistent, it gnaws at the edges of patience.

I see it mirrored in the girl's dark eyes, she has survived worse, I know, but she feels it too, the threat of emptiness.

The first night sounds begin as the light fades. Not just the whispers of wind or the distant clatter of soldiers' boots, but something deeper, I hear the city breath for the first time.

Hollow footsteps in empty streets, doors opening and closing where no one waits, and the metallic hum of wings overhead.

“Well, it looks like our metal friends are ready to call it a night!” the voice inside my head whispers.

I glance at the open window.

Across the street, the tree is dark, bare of its  
morning bird, but the memory of flight lingers.  
Somewhere, among the tangled rooftops and  
empty alleys, the small bird joins others.

A moment of hope that life persists despite  
the cages.

Dinner is silent, we listen more than we eat.  
My uncle dozes lightly, breathing shallow.

The girl watches the shadows.

I pace slowly, counting seconds in my mind,  
cataloging every subtle noise.

Then the patrols pass close.

Soldiers shout, sharp voices echoing,  
commands barked at doors, windows, walls.

The hum of the metal birds rise again, red  
beams flash over walls, over empty streets.

They seek someone who refuses to bend.

The girl shifts closer to me, “whoever they’re  
looking for, their fate is as dark as the night.”

“I know.” I whisper.

The night deepens but the hum continues,  
threading through every wall, every  
floorboard, every thought.

A lone crow cries somewhere beyond the  
towers, and I startle after I hear the  
unexpected sound.

We gather near the single candle that burns  
between us, shadows stretch long along the  
walls, dancing across the girl's face.

She is silent, my uncle sleeps, and I sit alert,  
listening to the surroundings.

Outside, the city hunts and in its hunting, it  
teaches the people fear and obedience.

The candle flickers once, then steadies,  
hunger remains, fear grows sharper.

But so does the faint glimmer of freedom and  
the memory of a small bird, once caged and  
now flying freely.

The pale disk has set beyond the horizon.  
Darkness swallows Zarim, yet the hum keeps  
lingering.

I cannot run from it, the sound follows me  
everywhere, even in my dreams.

But tonight, I think of that bird when I close  
my eyes, the bird that flies openly tonight.

The night conquers the city calmly again.

## • Chapter Three

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Morning light comes crawling to Zarim.

The pale disk yawns and drags itself to the towers from behind the mountains, the orange light on the horizon announces the arrival of daytime.

A golden beam of light forces my eyes open.

The bird is still leaping on the branches of the old tree that has stood its ground for thousands of years, I see it through the window.

I remain in my bed to check my surroundings.

The girl is curled in her corner once I look, her knees tucked to her chest as her black hair covers them from the light.

She has grown accustomed to a life that doesn't allow one to put their guard down.

My uncle sits on his chair.

The old soldier learned to sleep after he believed that the war of the Eleven Demons was long gone.

He is out cold in his wheelchair, snoring.

“Now that's how we should sleep,” the voice in my head murmurs.

I mostly ignore it, but I can never escape it.

To be honest, I'm afraid of the day I find the ability to fully escape my thoughts.

A harsh sound pounds on the door.

"I don't need herbs every day!" I say loudly, walking to the door.

"Open the door at once!" a harsh voice shouts from the other side. Boots shuffle behind the voice like an army was at the door.

My chest tightens as I hear the voice.

"Y... yes, sir?" I peek through.

A hand pushes the door back, opening it to its full potential.

Three soldiers take shape once I manage to stand up on my feet.

“Damn it, Phlinter!” my uncle roars out of sleep, “Can’t you wake up without making a mess!”

The soldier looks at him calmly.

“Forgive us, Commander, but we are here to execute the king’s orders,” the one in the middle says gently.

He pulls a glowing board from the belt pocket behind his sword sheath.

It is the most magnificent piece of stone I’ve ever seen in my life.

“He is asking you a question, dummy!” the voice in my head shouts after a moment.

“Have you seen this man?” the soldier in the middle asks when I’m aware.

“What is that you hold?” I ask him, still drowned in my own thoughts.

Another soldier redirects my hand as I try to touch the glowing board with his baton.

“I ask the questions here, young man!” the middle soldier growls.

“No, sir,” I reply, shaking my head.

“We have the king’s orders to search every residence, commander.” He turns to my uncle with a softer tone.

“Do as you must, soldier,” my uncle replies.

The soldier nods and starts searching the house, but my eyes are fixed on the glowing board hanging from his belt.

A board with smooth edges but hollow in the middle, once they push the button, a faint light dominates the center, forming images and information of all kinds.

The soldiers search the house for any sign of the man in the glowing board.

The soldiers hold the glowing board in front of every surface that seems like a point of interest.

A faint light makes a horizontal line across the pointed surface, then the glowing board

makes a sound and offers details in the light  
at its center.

The soldiers don't leave a stone unturned  
inside the house, but they don't make a mess.

The soldier in the middle walks my way again  
his every act is calmer than the others.

"This man is a traitor," he says, tapping on the  
glowing board, "You are to inform the closest  
patrol if you see a sign of him."

"The owners of every residence that grant  
shelter to this man will be punished by the  
king's orders," the other soldier continues.

"What did this man do?" I ask.

"That is irrelevant," the soldier replies.

“A patrol will be set in every street,” another soldier adds, “If you report a sign of this man, the king will reward you generously.”

“Our work is done here,” the soldier in the middle tells the others. “Let’s move out.”

“Can I go to the bazar for food, sir?” I ask as they are leaving.

“No, you are to remain indoors,” one of the soldiers says, turning.

“But sir, we have no food left in the cupboards, I must put food on the table,” I reply.

“That is not our concern,” another soldier says.

“Humanity left this city long ago,” my uncle says as they close the door, “All that remains is responsibility.”

The mid morning light claims Zarim as the soldiers leave our house.

The golden light shines on the fortress, turning its stone walls into pure gold.

The bird sits in the tree, fluttering its wings and leaping branch to branch with the other birds.

“Where is that girl again?” My uncle looks around.

“I don’t know,” I reply.

“She must’ve left,” my uncle resumes, “They always do when they get what they desire.”

A fragile figure crawls from under the bed, and the morning light defines it as the girl to my eyes.

“Where were you?!” I ask, shocked.

“Hiding,” she whispers.

“What for?” I ask.

“Searching for me!” She points to the soldiers she saw through the window.

“No,” I reply, “They were searching for a man.”

“A man?” her eyes widen.

“Yes,” my uncle replies, “Some poor guy got mixed up in something.”

Zarim is beautiful in the afternoon light.

The fortress shines copper under the light of the pale disk, as bright as the other buildings.

I think that's why some call it a god, it shows no difference in the blessings it gives, all are the same in its eyes.

The color of the light it shines on the fortress is never different from the color it shines on a stall.

The soldiers outside remain on patrol.

A door opens, some soldiers ask questions and leave after a walk around.

The search continues until the time Zarim drowns in the darkness of the night, and there

is no light in the sky except for the lunar and its children, all the houses in our district have been searched, but the man they were looking for was not found in any of them.

Soldiers retreat to the fortress as the night claims the city.

They say that the nighttime is the time for their rest, but we all hide what we fear.

Me and the girl sit facing each other with nothing between us but a candlelight flickering in the wind that comes from the heart of the night.

My uncle is asleep on his chair with an unusual comfort.

My eyes are fixed on those dark marbles the  
girl has for eyes, their beauty is unlike any  
sight I have ever witnessed in my life.

A wind passes by, shaking the old tree.

Birds flee when they notice the shake, and I  
turn to look at what is going on.

When I turn back to resume my nighttime  
hobby, the girl blows the candlelight out...

## • Chapter Four

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The pale disk rises again, slow and indifferent, over Zarim, its light spilling across rooftops and casting long shadows over streets that hum faintly under the weight of the city's surveillance, the metal birds drifting lazily with mechanical wings glinting and red eyes blinking in regular patterns.

A knock shatters the morning stillness, sharp and deliberate but familiar.

“Phlinter it’s me Kalaris,” A voice speaks from behind the door.

“Oh, they sent the bazar soldier to collect the prize,” the voice in my head murmurs.

My chest tightens as I open the door.

Kalaris stands there with a basket in hand, the smell of bread, cheese and dried meat spilling into the room and he is no longer just a face from the bazar, he is someone present.

“You... you brought food?” I managed with a voice cracking slightly.

“I can’t let the people starve,” he says with a shrug, “especially the elderly like your uncle.”

“Kalaris,” I glanced at the basket, “Is the inspection over?” I asked.

“The man was captured at midnight,” He frowned, “One of the king’s councilors.”

“What did he do to raise such attention?” I asked guiding Kalaris inside.

“He refused to feed the High Table with more coin and privileges.” Kalaris replied walking inside.

I swallow hard, staring at the food as hunger gnaws sharper than it did yesterday.

But when my gaze drifted to the glowing board another kind of hunger called.

“What is this you have?” I ask.

Kalaris chuckles, lighting a cigarette from the stub of another, “A soldier’s best friend.”

“Yes,” I said, “but what does it do?”

“See for yourself.” He said passing the glowing board to me.

“Directions, records, maps,” He continued, “It has whatever a soldier might need on his task.”

The girl stirs quietly in the corner, stepping briefly towards the basket, but she does not speak, and Kalaris notices her.

His eyes holding hers for a moment, no words exchanged.

“These two know each other.” The voice in my head lingers sparking a thought in my head.

“Do you know her?” I asked when the girl left the room.

“I saw a picture of her in the glowing board once,” Kalaris says softly, leaning against the table with the cigarette in hand, “Daughter of sir Belsharuk of Varuktesh, commander of the 5<sup>th</sup> battalion in the Battle of the Cursed Clouds.”

“Why would a war hero’s daughter’s image be on a glowing board?” I ask softly.

“You’re only a war hero if your side wins,” He murmurs, “If not, you are no more than a criminal”

“And you will be treated as one.” I said.

“Yes, and that is what happened when Belsharuk was defeated,” Kalaris replied, “but there was nothing left of him so they chose to punish her name.”

“So, they sold his daughter to the brothel.” I responded.

“Exactly.” Kalaris spoke.

My uncle was sitting in the other end of the room, drowned in his thoughts but he remained silent.

I pour wine into two chipped glasses.

Kalaris sits facing me, setting the basket aside, eyes steady as cigarette smoke curls upward.

“So, who are these High Table ministers?” I ask leaning forward.

My curiosity is sharper than hunger today.

He flicks ash into a small tray, “They’re the ones that have control over every aspect of this rotten city.”

I drink, letting the words settle, “Even the ordinary people?”

“Of course,” Kalaris says, leaning back and lighting a second cigarette, “The people are their greatest assets, they control lives by choosing who to feed and who to leave.”

These words send a chill down my bones.

“And the king lets this happen?” I ask.

“The king has no power without their wealth,” Kalaris replies, “A king without gold can’t even command his own army.”

“So, he leaves them be to keep the gold flowing?” I ask shocked.

“He has no other options,” Kalaris replies, “he has lost too many resources in the war and now he has nothing but a crown.”

Hours pass as conversation drifts from ministers and councils to courage and survival, cigarettes burning low and wine glasses emptying slowly.

“Would your father approve this if he was still among us?” I ask him.

“I never really knew my father,” he responds, leaning back, “he left for the war when I was no more than a toddler, and when he came back, there was not much life left in him.”

“So, who taught you to be a worthy soldier if not him?” I ask, following the voice in my head.

“The stories my mother told of him,” he responds in a soft tone.

“That makes sense,” I reply.

From the window, I spot a small bird wings glinting in the fading light and so does Kalaris,

we share a quiet smile, “My father,” he murmurs, “he would have loved this... seeing freedom for once, even if it’s only a bird.”

A warmth spreads through the room, fragile but real.

The girl remains silent, watching from the corner during supper, disappearing quietly afterward.

Kalaris does not comment in her presence, but when the door is closed and we are alone, he speaks, “She is all that remains of such a worthy commander,” Kalaris says.

This evening passes in the blink of an eye, having a conversation like this after a long time makes time feel like nothing.

Humanity disappeared from this city long ago,  
I admire the humanity left in him.

Night stretches across the city as Kalaris  
stands, brushing crumbs from his clothes, my  
uncle nods satisfied the young soldier visited.

“Take care of yourselves, young man,” my  
uncle says, gentle but firm.

Outside, the bird rises from the crooked tree  
and joins others in the sky and Kalaris  
notices, a rare smile crossing his face and I  
return it, hope threading between us no  
matter how fragile and fleeting.

“Good talk, Phlintar,” he says softly,  
disappearing into the darkened streets.

Inside, the candle flickers then steadies, full bellies and quiet hearts settling into the room, the girl sitting silently, my uncle resting and I lie back on the floor as the hum of the city continues, threading beneath us, connecting us to everything and nothing.

Zarim wears the shadows, commanding us to rest for the next time we witness the warmth of the pale disk.

## • Chapter Five

---

The morning light shakes Zarim without mercy.

The pale disk rises as it always does, spilling its thin light across towers, shutters and streets that no longer pretend to sleep.

The whispering metal beneath the roads hums a little louder today, or perhaps I am simply listening harder.

The city feels taut, like a wire drawn too tight.

I wake before the girl moves, before my uncle coughs himself into consciousness.

Before the metal birds finish their first low  
circle of the morning.

Something has shifted today.

Outside, patrols pass earlier than usual, their  
boots strike the ground in tighter rhythm,  
closer together.

With the man arrested, the soldiers move with  
more confidence today but they still carry  
strict orders given by the king.

The city is not just angry or nervous.

It is drowning in an urge to avenge the  
disobedience it faced.

My uncle sits up slowly in his chair, rubbing  
his chest. "They're on edge," he mutters,

listening to the street, “Someone rattled the cage, now they look to punish whatever that moves.”

I know who he means.

That man in the glowing board, his image hasn't left my mind since I saw it.

The man Kalaris spoke of last night, the one who dared to disagree with the king and his High Table, I can't understand why someone refuses an order from the king or how they find the courage to do so.

I have more questions than answers for the voice pushing my thoughts around.

“Maybe he wants change.” The voice murmurs.

“No, that can’t be a valid reason to throw one’s life away.” I answer it.

“Maybe he is naïve!” The voice whispers.

“No, the council is too complicated for a naïve man, he must be a smart fellow” I respond.

“Maybe he has a good heart” the voice says after a moment.

“That might be it” I agree with it.

The girl stands near the window, fingers resting lightly on the shutters.

Her eyes follow the shadows of the metal birds as they pass overhead, lower than before this time.

“They are counting,” she whispers.

“Counting what?” I ask.

“Breaths,” she replies. “Steps, words.”

I nod, that matches my own assessment.

The inventory is almost empty...

“I’ll go to the bazaar,” I say, reaching for my coat.

My uncle frowns. “Today?”

“If not today, then when?” I answer. “Hunger doesn’t wait.”

The girl turns sharply. “Do not stay long.”

I offer a thin smile. “I never do.”

“Don’t lie.” the voice in my head whispers with a playful tone.

The streets are quieter than they should be.

Shutters are half drawn despite the rising light, doors open only long enough to exchange coin and goods, then slam shut again, conversations die the moment soldiers pass, even the wind whispers today afraid of being overheard saying the wrong things.

“If I had the body and you were trapped in here, I would’ve stayed home starving.” The voice said in my ear.

“Good thing the coward one doesn’t have the body then.” I respond.

At the bazaar, stalls stand farther apart.

Gaps where merchants once shouted now yawn open and silent, prices are written larger and bolder, no one dares to negotiate, no discussions happen today.

A patrol stands at the center of the square.

“Purchase quickly and leave the area.” one of the soldiers calls loudly.

The words ripple outward, flattening the crowd under the morning light.

I move toward a grain stall, counting coins in my head, the vendor avoids my eyes.

“That’s the price,” he says before I speak.

“It was lower yesterday,” I reply.

“Yesterday is gone,” he answers.

I know my coins are not enough but I set them  
down anyway.

The soldier steps closer, I feel his shadow  
before I see his face.

“Problem gentlemen?” he asks.

“I’m short of coin,” I say carefully. “My uncle is  
sick, He hasn’t eaten properly in days.”

The soldier’s expression doesn’t change.

“Then you should have prepared better.”

“I prepared as best I could,” I reply. “He fought  
for this city under the king’s banner.”

“Shut up! Shut up!” The voice in my head shouts.

The soldier’s eyes sharpen. “Then he should have fought better.”

Something tightens in my chest not in anger but clarity, we joined forces with the sound in my head for a moment.

“Perhaps this will be your fate one day sir!”

I say in a louder tone.

The voice in my head punishes me with silence when I most need its validation.

It can be dramatic sometimes but it always speaks the truth.

The soldier studies me for a long moment.

Around us, the crowd pulls away slowly.

No one wants to test their tolerance today.

“Arrest him,” the soldier says.

Hands seize my arms, with unpredictable speed before I get a chance to act.

“This is unnecessary,” I say.

“You don’t know to keep your mouth shut when you have to kid!” the soldier replies,

“You shall learn that lesson in our school.”

“Oh bravo!” the voice in my head says.

They do the procedure as if they have lots of practice.

They walk me through streets that pretend not to exist, past doors that stay closed and windows that haven't been open in decades. The city does not watch openly anymore, It already knows my fate.

We descend.

Stone replaces light in no time and the air grows colder and heavier.

The hum of the city dulls into a distant vibration, like a heartbeat heard through water.

Then the cell door opens.

Inside, someone is already there, a shadow of a man sits in chains.

He sits on the stone bench with his hands folded in his lap with a careful posture, almost polite.

His clothes are clean but rumpled, as if he dressed without urgency.

His hair is neatly combed and his eyes lift when I enter, there is no fear in them.

“Some one’s happy to have company!” the voice in my head whispers.

The door closes behind me.

The lock turns before I hear the door slam.

Night settles without ceremony.

I sit across from him, studying details.

“He doesn’t seem like a soldier.” the voice in my head says.

I agree with it.

“He is too clean for a criminal.” it continues.

I agree with it.

“What do you think?” it asks after a moment.

“I’m confused” I reply.

“You? Confused? I thought you always had the best ideas, like getting us locked up instead of safe at home.” it says.

I sit across the shadowy figure ignoring the voice.

Neither of us speaks.

Aboveground, Zarim drowns in darkness.

The pale disk sinks behind the towers, leaving  
the city in copper shadow.

Patrols continue their circuits.

Metal birds glide in slow, patient arcs.

At home, the uncle waits longer than he  
should be awake.

The girl stands near the door, fingers flexing,  
listening for footsteps that do not come.

The city hums on.

And somewhere beneath it, in a stone  
chamber that does not care who I am, I sit in  
silence beside a shadow of a man who I know  
nothing of.

The city holds me tonight.

“Don’t worry, you can still get us killed tomorrow” the voice in my head whispers.

“Shut up and let me sleep.” I respond.

And the darkness swallows us...

## • Chapter Six

---

Today starts differently than the others.

I wake to a taste of metal and stone.

A small creek of water trickles across the stone bench I fell asleep on last night, cool and insistent against my skin.

The air smells faintly of damp soil and something older, heavier, as if the stones themselves remember the prisoners who sits before my eyes.

The pale disk shows itself through the bars of the window fixed high on the cell ceiling, a thread of light slides along the walls.

Another thread follows, brushing a picture on the stone so intricate I cannot hope to understand it.

My eyes strain to trace the lines, to follow the patterns, but the shapes remain stubbornly opaque, as if mocking me for even trying.

“Ah, nothing like a taste of fresh water,” the voice in my head whispers as I try to keep my eyes closed.

I try to ignore it, but it always finds a way to pull me in.

A strange susurrations squeezes in, stitched to the beams of light so high I cannot begin to measure them.

It is a sound so soft and fragile that it could easily be forgotten within these stone walls full of echoes, clinks and murmurs I cannot make sense of.

My ears strain and so does my mind.

“Oh look,” it whispers, “A little feathered poet trying to make a point.”

I cannot hold myself.

“And what is that?” I ask.

“Oh, do not be mad at me,” it says, “the one reminding you that you are in a cage and it is not, is up there.”

“Leave me alone,” I reply.

“If you listen closely, you can almost hear it,”  
it says, “look who is in a cage now.” It  
continues singing.

Fine, I say, “Have it your way.”

It finally leaves me in a brief, fragile quiet.

The faint smell of water, the movement of  
light across the walls, even the cold of the  
stones, all seem peaceful for a moment.

Until a rough scream from the far end of the  
corridor drives me from my bench.

It sounds almost like scratching in a closed  
room, raw and ragged and scraping along  
stone so cold it would sting my fingers if I  
touched it.

I sit up to take stock.

The man across from me is already upright,  
leaning his back against the wall.

Beams of light from above touch his  
shoulders as if trying to comfort him for a  
crime he did not commit.

His head is down, his knees drawn to his  
chest, and I cannot see his face.

“We have never seen cloth so magnificent,”  
the voice whispers softly.

“What do you mean,” I ask.

“You cannot steal such clothes in the bazar,”  
it says. “This is no ordinary man.”

Something snaps in me.

The voice is right.

A distant clinking echoes along the corridor.

Chains drag across the cold stones, the sound reaches my ears and sends a chill down my spine, though it is far away.

The man across me remains still, unflinching.

I wonder what causes such a sound.

“Focus, you idiot,” the voice shouts.

“On what?” I ask.

“On your royal roommate.” it replies.

“What do you suggest, genius?” I ask.

“Pay attention to the details,” it says. “The man did not flinch at the sounds that would give you nightmares.”

“So?” I reply.

“He is either dead inside or knows this place too well,” it says.

“It makes sense,” I reply. “People dressed like that do not survive long here.”

The bird sings again, its note delicate as if it waited for permission from the city to exist once more.

The man across begins to unfold toward the sound, slow and deliberate.

“Do you hear it too?” He asks, still keeping his head down.

“Yes,” I respond.

I thought my mind was playing tricks on me,  
he says almost to himself.

“Mine already is,” I reply.

He chuckles quietly and remains as he is.

“Oh joy,” the voice says, “our prince is not  
dead yet.”

“And?” I reply.

“Do I have to explain everything to you?” it  
says in a disappointed tone, “People dressed  
like that do not usually stay in places like this  
for long.”

“What do you propose?” I ask.

“Talk to him,” it replies. “Make a connection  
and maybe he can be a way out of here.”

An impact rattles the bars and I startle.

The man across me unfolds fully, eyes wide with shock, scanning the corridor to figure out what happened, I am equally stunned.

A guard shouts, “Food for the scum,” sliding a plate through a small hatch in the cell door.

At that moment, I can finally put a face on the man sitting across me.

We stare at each other, silently calculating what to do with the small offering after a long, unbearable hunger.

“What sorcery is this?” the voice rings.

“What do you mean?” I ask shocked.

“You really do not see it, you dullard?” it says.

“What is there to see?” I ask.

“This is the man in the glowing board from the other day,” it replies, “the one the soldiers dug the ground to find.”

I take a closer look in the pale disk’s light.

His hair is unkempt, his beard speckled with grey but still, I recognize him.

This is the councilor Kalaris mentioned, the one arrested for disobedience.

“You are the arrested councilor.” I say aloud, almost unconsciously.

“The name is Arvenash,” he replies politely.

“Sir Arvenash of Tahl, son of Lord Juffairian.”

“You dolt imp!” the voice shouts.

“And I am Phlintar,” I reply. “Just Phlintar.”

“I see,” he responds. “So, what brings you to this part of the city, young man?”

“An honest answer.” I reply.

“A simple honesty can cost a man these days.” he says.

I nod in agreement.

“So, it seems, sir.” I respond.

Arvenash gestures to the plate on the ground.

“Shall we eat to live another day?” he asks.

“Yes.” I reply.

The pale disk roams the sky, shining its light equally to all, even us buried within these cold stone walls.

“My poor uncle.” I whisper after we eat.

“What of him?” Arvenash asks.

“I went to the bazar to bring food home the day they took me,” I say. “He must be starving by now.”

“Which would have been a far better fate for us.” the voice interrupts.

“Do not worry, young man.” Arvenash says.

“Things will find a way to improve.”

“Maybe for you.” I reply.

Arvenash shakes his head. “My fate will be far worse than you imagine.”

“This guy’s head would have been a much better home for me than yours.” the voice whispers.

The pale disk begins to fade, dragging the gift of life with it.

Zarim wears evening, copper colored light and shadow spreading across the walls, forcing us to face the bars we are held behind.

Footsteps echo in the corridors, calm and steady, key chains dominate the silence, sending chills down my bones as I think of the future.

“It might be time to say goodbye, young man.” Arvenash says.

The guard approaches, keys swinging like toys, I shake in fear.

He studies us, then turns and leaves the way he came.

“Guess not.” the voice whispers.

I exhale a long breath, still tense from the footsteps I heard.

“This is not the proper time to worry,” Arvenash says. “What is done is done.”

“What brings you here?” I ask trembling.

“I did not sign the papers the High Table wanted to execute their masterplans,” he says.

“And that was enough to put you here?” I ask.

“So, it seems.” He answered.

Zarim wears the night now.

Time passes unnoticed within the walls.

Shadows grow thick, swallowing sight and  
almost one of the senses feels useless.

Footsteps approach again, fragile light spilling  
along the corridors.

Wildlings follow, chains striking the bars,  
voices rising and fading in the stones.

“Is that our fate?” the voice asks. “What a  
waste!”

I lift my head for comfort, but see nothing,  
only darkness.

“Phlinter!” a voice calls.

My bones shiver, I rise unconsciously and  
move to the bars.

A shadow wrapped in cloth approaches,  
lantern in hand.

He does not look like a guard or a soldier.

I stick my hand out, A cold breeze pushes me  
forward granting me courage.

The shadow raises the lantern, I see his face.

“Kalaris!” the voice calls.

“Your uncle was looking for you at the bazar  
today, Phlintar,” he says. “I started searching  
everywhere since midday.”

“The soldiers brought me here because I told  
one of them the truth.” I said softly.

“Truth might cost you your head in this city,” he says. “You should know that by now.”

“Oh wonderful,” the voice says. “Surrounded by geniuses, and here you stand.”

A crow splits the silence with a cry, echoing through the walls repeatedly.

“What were you doing out anyway?” Kalaris murmurs.

“We were already out of food.” I say almost to myself. “They must be starving by now.”

“And when do we celebrate this wonderful victory of yours?” the voice laughs.

“I took care of that problem,” Kalaris replies. “They will be well fed until you return.”

“Why waste your coins on my family?” I ask in disbelief.

“Your uncle saved my father in the war,” he says. “I can never repay that with coin.”

“Thank you, Kalaris,” I say. “You are an honorable soldier.”

“Take care of yourself in here.” he says.

“Do not worry, I have company.” I say nodding toward Arvenash.

“Councilor?!” Kalaris asked shocked.

“I thought they would give you a better cell.”

He continued.

“Kind of you to say,” Arvenash replies. “But isn’t every cell the same?”

“Aw,” Kalaris mutters. “I” see you two have been getting along nicely.”

Arvenash nods.

An owl calls nearby, introducing Zarim to the stars, Its sound cuts through our conversation.

“Will you visit tomorrow?” I ask Kalaris.

“That I cannot promise,” he replies. “But rest assured, your family will be fed while you are here.”

“Good man,” Arvenash says as Kalaris turns away.

Night conquers the cell as Kalaris leaves with his lantern, forcing sleep upon us.

I lie down on the bench, trying to close my eyes, as if it makes any difference.

“No one cheered for the hero of the city?” the voice murmurs. “What a waste.”

I try to ignore it.

The night roams over Zarim, swallowing all that remains outside the walls.

I hope tomorrow, I shall have the gift of sight again...

## • Chapter Seven

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Beams of light manage to pass through the cracks that formed on the dungeon walls decades before our time.

The pale disk cannot reach us within the dungeon walls no matter how hard it tries.

We can only see it once a day, when it is fixed in the radius of the barred window carved in the dungeon ceiling.

A brush woven out of golden light tries to sweep away the dust that sits on my face.

I blink and sit up slowly as I feel the warmth.

The stones beneath me are cold, and the air carries the familiar scent of rust and damp. The dungeon is quiet in the first light, quieter than it ever becomes once the day begins its slow descent toward noise and unrest.

For a moment, it feels as if the world above has forgotten we exist.

Arvenash is already awake.

He sits with his back against the far wall, watching the thin line of light as if it is something distant, but familiar.

His expression is calm, but there is a tiredness in his eyes that the morning cannot soften.

“It will get easier with time.” He says.

I rub my eyes. “What will?”

“Waking up in a place that does not care whether you wake at all.” He replies

I look at him for a moment.

The light shifts across the floor, and I follow it with my eyes before speaking again.

“I keep thinking about your decision,” I say.

“The papers you refused to sign, do you ever wonder if you made the right decision?”

He watches the dust drifting through the light, and when he finally speaks, his voice is quieter than before.

“Right and wrong are not as clear as you think.” He finally speaks.

“Then how do you tell them apart?” I ask.

“You cannot,” he says. “You only choose what you can live with.”

I sense there is more behind his words.

He exhales slowly, “When I was no more than twenty, my father sent me to stop a war, I carried his seal and a white banner, believing it meant something.”

The dungeon grows still around us.

Even the dust drifting through the light seems to slow its fall.

“I walked into the valley between the armies,” he continues, “The ground was torn from the night before and the air was thick with smoke.”

A crow cries from afar.

“Men from eleven realms stood facing one another, each convinced the others had poisoned the winds.” He continued.

I shift closer without meaning to, “Poisoned the winds?”

“That is what they believed,” Arvenash says.

“Urkashur swore Deravshkar tainted the air, Deravshkar swore Artamur’s furnaces corrupted the clouds, Artamur blamed Mirzun, Mirzun blamed Kelvard, Kelvard

blamed Sahradun and Sahradun blamed them all.”

He lets out a slow breath.

“They all believed they were right.”

“But someone must have started it.” I frown.

Arvenash shakes his head, “It wasn’t something anyone could start on their own, but sometimes people choose to believe stories over the truth.”

The light on the floor begins to fade as the pale disk climbs higher outside.

“How did they deal with this pollution?” I ask.

“They tried to fix it,” he says. “Each realm in its own way, convinced their method was the only correct one but they made it worse.”

He exhaled slowly.

“The clouds thickened and turned poisonous, once the realms realized the clouds could kill, they used them as weapons, and that is how the war of the Eleven Demons sparked with the Battle of the Cursed Clouds.”

I stare at him. “So, who was right?”

“All of them,” Arvenash says.

“And who was wrong?” I ask.

“All of them.” He responds.

The words settle between us like dust falling through the last of the morning light.

He looks at me with a calm that feels older than the dungeon walls. “Right and wrong change when you look from another angle, Phlintar.”

The light disappears from the floor.

The dungeon returns to its dim, familiar shade.

The silence that follows feels heavier than the one before, as if the walls themselves are holding the last of Arvenash’s words.

I sit with them longer than I expect.

They change the shape of the air around us.

Arvenash rests his head against the wall.

His eyes are half closed, not in sleep but in a kind of stillness that comes only after speaking a truth he has carried for too long.

The dungeon hums faintly, a low vibration that seems to rise from the stone beneath us.

It is the sound of the city above, filtered through mud and iron.

I draw my knees closer and watch the faint dust drifting in the dimness. “If right and wrong are opinions,” I say quietly, “then how do we know if we made the right choice?”

Arvenash opens his eyes.

The dim light catches them for a moment.

“You trust your instincts and let the outcome decide if you made the right decision or the other way around.”

“And what is the outcome?” I ask.

“Consequences.” He says.

The word lands without echo.

It simply settles between us.

A bowl is pushed through the bars at the end of the corridor, the scrape of metal against stone breaks the quiet.

Someone mutters in the distance, another laughs in a way that carries no warmth.

Hunger stirs in my stomach.

I pull the bowl closer and drink the thin broth.

It warms my chest for a moment before fading.

Arvenash watches me finish.

His gaze is steady, but there is something behind it, something waiting.

“You asked if I made the right choice.” He says.

“Yes.” I replied.

“You asked the wrong question.” He spoke.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Then what should I have asked?”

“You should ask why they wanted my signature at all.”

A faint chill runs through me, “Why?”

Arvenash shifts slightly, the chains at his wrists giving a soft metallic sound, “Because my signature proves the story, they want the people to believe.”

“What story?” I lean forward.

“That they are inevitable,” he says, “That they are righteous and that they are the only order capable of holding this realm together.”

“But you do not believe that.”

“No,” Arvenash says. “I have seen what happens when people believe their own stories too much.”

He closes his eyes again, but this time it is not to rest, it is to remember.

“When I returned from the valley,” he says, “I carried the truth with me, I carried the knowledge that the war of the Eleven Demons could be stopped if the realms chose humility over pride, I carried the memory of soldiers who listened, even if only for a moment.”

His voice grows quieter.

“I also carried the belief that my father would want to hear what I had witnessed.”

The dungeon seems to tighten around us, the air grows colder.

“He did not,” Arvenash says. “He removed my name from the book of history, he removed the record of my mission, he removed the moment when the armies paused and he removed the truth because it did not serve the story he wanted to tell.”

“What story was that?” I swallow.

“That Tahl never bent,” he says. “That Tahl never sought peace, that Tahl defended five strikes without hesitation and that Tahl was righteous since the beginning.”

The silence that follows is different from the earlier quiet, it is heavier, it belongs to him.

“I was not erased because I failed,” Arvenash says. “I was erased because I succeeded in

something my father did not want remembered.”

He leans his head back against the wall.

The dimness softens the lines on his face, but it cannot hide the exhaustion beneath them.

“That is what history is, it is the version of events that the ones in power want the people to believe, not the truth.”

The dungeon hums again low and steady, as if echoing the ache beneath his words.

The day continues its slow descent toward evening, though no light marks the change. Only the cold deepens as the sounds shift.

“So, when the High Table asked for your signature,” I say, “they wanted your silence.”

“They wanted my past to justify their future,” Arvenash says. “They wanted my name to strengthen their story.”

“And you refused.” I spoke.

“Yes,” he says. “Because I know what it feels like to get mixed up in a story that is not mine.”

The dungeon darkens further as the last traces of daylight fade from the narrow opening above us.

The walls settle into night.

Chains shift, someone whispers, another cries, another laughs without joy.

Arvenash speaks one final time, his voice barely above a breath.

“Remember that systems do not fear the truth, Phlintar.” He speaks, “They fear the people who remember it.”

I lie back against the cold floor and close my eyes, the words circle in my mind with a weight that feels both sharp and necessary.

“Nothing is right or wrong.” The voice in my head lingers, “Everything is a choice followed by what you believe in.”

“And?” I say trying to teach it, sharpen it like a blade of my own.

“Consequences will reveal the truth.” It continues.

“And what of history?” I force it to remember.

“That the truth maybe buried under stacks of books, books written by the ones in power to change history to their favor.”

“Yes,” I agree with it.

And somewhere in the dark, an owl reminds me to rest for tomorrow...

## • Chapter Eight

---

The morning begins before the light reaches us, the dungeon is still half asleep, breathing in slow, uneven breaths through the cracks in its walls.

The pale disk has not yet climbed high enough to touch the barred window above, but a faint grey glow settles over the stones like a thin sheet of frost, I sit up and feel the cold travel through my palms.

Arvenash is already awake.

He sits with his back against the wall, his eyes half open, watching nothing in particular.

His breathing is steady, but there is a heaviness in it, as if the night has not fully released him.

A sound breaks the quiet.

It is distant at first, a muffled clatter of boots against stone.

Then the voices, then the sharp ring of a key turning in iron.

The noise grows louder as it moves down the corridor, but it is not coming for us.

It is heading toward the far end, where the cells narrow and the shadows deepen.

Arvenash does not move, he listens.

I shift closer to the bars and look down the corridor.

Two guards appear, their armor catching the faint morning glow.

Between them walks a third man holding a rope.

The rope is tied around the wrists of a woman I have seen only once before.

She sits in the last cell, the one closest to the stairway that leads to the courtyard above.

She is standing now, her hair is tangled and her face is bruised but her eyes are steady.

One of the guards unlocks her cell.

The rope is pulled.

She steps forward without resisting.

“What did she do?” I whisper.

“She cursed the king’s name.” Arvenash answers without looking.

The guards begin to drag her toward the stairs, she stumbles once, but she does not cry out.

Her voice rises only when she reaches the first step.

“May the truth find you,” she says. “May it find you even if you burry it.”

A guard strikes her across the mouth.

The sound echoes through the corridor.

Then they pull her up the stairs and out of sight, the dungeon swallows the silence that follows.

“What did she mean by this?” I sit back slowly.

Arvenash closes his eyes for a moment.

“Some people speak such words because they believe their words can save them, others speak such words because they no longer care if they live or die, and some speak such words because they think they understand the situation they are in.”

“And she did not?” I look at him.

“No,” he says. “She didn’t.”

The dungeon hums faintly beneath us.

“Always assume there is someone smarter in the room before you speak,” he says. “Silence is never a weakness, sometimes It is a shield, sometimes It is a weapon, it is the space where you learn who is truly in control.”

I think of the woman’s voice echoing through the corridors.

Arvenash opens his eyes fully now, “Let me tell you story of the first time the realms gathered to discuss peace.”

The faint morning light finally reaches the barred window above us, a thin beam falls across the floor.

“It was a fragile negotiation,” Arvenash says.

“The war had already taken too much from everyone, they met in a hall of Zarim’s fortress, a place chosen because every realm could gather there simultaneously.”

He shifts slightly, the chains at his wrists giving a soft metallic sound.

“Kings spoke of reasons,” he continues.

“Ministers argued, generals shouted at each other, everyone blamed one another for the poisoned winds and the war of the Eleven Demons continued with the Battle of the Untied Lions.”

“Battle of the United Lions?” I ask.

“Yes, because King Varesh was different,” Arvenash replies. “He was the only king who didn’t speak a word in the meeting, he sat in a far corner and listened to the others.”

The light grows stronger, stretching across the stones.

“Artamur and Varuktesh were in a tough spot,” Arvenash says. “Artamur suffered an unimaginable number of casualties holding Urkashur back desperately and Varuktesh lost their most important commander, Varesh had a master plan in the corner.”

“What did he do?” I ask.

“He spoke only once,” Arvenash says. “He said he shared the same concerns as

Veruktesh and Artamur and that their interests aligned so he offered unity for the three as the only path to survival.”

“And they believed him?” I ask.

“They wanted to,” Arvenash says. “Fear makes allies of strangers.”

I feel the weight of his words.

“By the end of that meeting,” he continues, “three realms stood together Orinthal, Veruktesh and Artamur, against two isolated realms, Urkashur and Nivarash.”

“And the war continued?” I asked softly.

“Yes,” Arvenash says. “But now it was no longer a battle of six individual realms, it was

a battle of alliances, Urkashur fought fiercely but they could not stand against three united fronts and Nivarash, fell into Varesh's hands in a matter of days and Zarim folded before the battle even begun."

He looks at the dim light on the floor.

"That is how eleven realms became ten," he says. "And that is the start of an alliance that ended the war of The Eleven Demons."

The dungeon is quiet again, morning has fully arrived, but the air feels heavier than before.

Arvenash rests his head back against the wall. "This is how you win, Phlinter." He says, "speak only when you fully understood the situation you are in."

I sit with his words, feeling them settle like dust in the morning light.

The silence after Arvenash finishes speaking stretches across the cell like a thin veil.

The morning light has settled into its usual pale shape on the floor, but it feels different now, heavier somehow as if the story of the eleven realms has changed the air around us.

I thought about the fall of Nivarash and its disappearance, removing the eleventh realm from the map once and for all.

Arvenash shifts slightly, and the chains at his wrists give a soft metallic sound.

“There is something else you should understand,” he says. His voice is calm, but there is a depth beneath it, a weight that was not there before. “Winning a battle is one thing, keeping what you have taken is another.”

“You mean ruling Nivarash.” I look at him.

“Yes,” he says. “Conquering a realm is easy, any fool with enough soldiers can do it, but holding a realm together after the chaos ends requires something far rarer.”

“So how did Varesh act?” I ask.

Arvenash lets out a slow breath. “He did not rule them through fear, he did not burn their temples nor did he force them to kneel.”

“He understood something the other kings never learned?” I asked.

“Exactly.” Arvenash replied.

The dungeon hums faintly beneath us, as if it is listening to his stories.

“He let the people of Nivarash keep their gods,” Arvenash says. “He knew faith is the spine of a nation, if you break it, the people break with it, but if you respect it, they will accept your rule.”

I nod slowly.

“He forbade his troops from touching the civilians,” Arvenash continues. “No looting, no burning and no humiliation, he told his

generals that victory meant nothing if the people hated the sight of Orinthal's banners."

The light on the floor shifts slightly as the pale disk climbs higher in the sky.

"He did something no king had done before him," Arvenash says. "He signed a contract directly with the people ignoring the nobles, the priests and the generals."

"What kind of contract?" I ask.

"A simple one," Arvenash replies. "Orinthal would invest in rebuilding Nivarash, in return, Orinthal would receive half of Nivarash's resources, not as tribute but as a partnership between the two realms."

I feel the weight of the idea. “And they agreed without a rebellion?”

“They agreed because he treated them with dignity,” Arvenash says. “He allowed them to choose a king of their own, a king with no army, a king who would govern the people, not command soldiers.”

“And that worked?” I ask.

“It worked because Varesh understood the truth,” Arvenash says. “Power endures only when it protects, respects and liberates the people, fear can win a battle but respect wins a generation of loyalty.”

“What do you mean by liberation?” I ask.

“Good question,” He replied scratching his chin, “The birds in a cage can’t see the bars if the walls of the cage are covered with flowers.”

“That does not answer my question.” I reply shocked.

“Actually, it does,” He said, “Let me explain.”

Then he moves a little and sits closer to me.

“Liberty is nothing more than a bigger cage my friend,” He said looking into my eyes, “A cage so big that you cannot see its borders.”

I have no answer and the voice inside my head is more silent than ever.

The dungeon grows quiet again.

The day has settled fully now, but the air feels different, as if the walls themselves are holding the lesson.

“Most rulers believe power comes from the sword,” Arvenash says. “But Varesh was a wise and patient man, he knew how to make an invisible cage around his people and call it liberty.”

I sit back against the cold stone and close my eyes for a moment.

“Always assume the others know more than you in a meeting.” The voice in my head murmured.

“Yes, and?” I sharpened it.

“Power is noble when it serves protects and respects the people not the minority.”

“Exactly.” I smiled to myself.

Arvenash rests his head against the wall again, his eyes drift half closed, not in sleep but in a quiet that feels earned.

“These are the things you must remember, Phlinter,” he says softly. “Because one day, you will walk into rooms where silence is sharper than any blade, and someday, every man will hold power of his own, and when that time comes, you must decide what kind of man you will be.”

The dungeon hums.

The light shifts.

The day starts to fade slowly.

I breathe slowly, letting the weight of his words settle into me like dust in the pale glow.

And somewhere in the corridor, far from our cell, sounds climb our way to haunt my dreams.

A bird singing on the window in the heart of the ceiling turns into an owl in no time.

It is easy to lose track of time within these cold stone walls.

The silver light claims the cell making it glow, the lunar is more thoughtful than the pale disk, she keeps watching over us without

moving around, perhaps that is what a true god must do.

Or perhaps the pale disk wants to cover more ground solving more problems.

“Shut up and get some sleep!” The voice in my head shouts at me.

I close my eyes and try to go to sleep...

## • Chapter Nine

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The pale disk rises late on the third day.

Or perhaps I do.

Time no longer divides itself cleanly.

Morning does not arrive so much as seep into  
the cell, thin and uncertain.

The light touches the wall at a slightly  
different angle, and for a moment I wonder  
whether the sky has shifted or if I have simply  
fallen out of rhythm with it.

My body feels heavier today.

Not weaker, not yet.

Just weighted, as if gravity has quietly increased, each movement asks for deliberation.

Across from me, Arvenash sits with his back straight against the stone, eyes closed, conserving energy the way others conserve coin, he looks smaller somehow, contained rather than diminished.

His breathing is steady, but there is a stillness in him that feels deliberate, as if he is saving every thought for when it is needed.

The corridor stirs before we do, footsteps pass more frequently than before and doors open and close at measured intervals.

The pattern is subtle but unmistakable.

Something has changed.

“They are adjusting something,” I say.

“Yes,” Arvenash replies.

The activity is deliberate, not chaotic.

“They were quieter before,” I murmur.

“They were observing,” he says. “Now they are applying structure.”

A distant cry echoes down the corridor, sharp and brief, Then silence.

Heavy, deliberate silence.

It settles over the stones like a warning.

“That is not random,” I say.

“No,” Arvenash replies calmly. “It is a demonstration.”

“For whom?” I ask.

“For everyone.” He replies.

Before I can respond, a sudden commotion erupts at the far end of the corridor.

Metal strikes stone, a voice shouts, another answers with a nonviolent tone, but it is disordered.

A cluster of prisoners arguing, pushing, reacting to something unseen.

The guards do not intervene they just watch. They let the chaos breathe.

“Why are they allowing this?” I grip the bars.

“To see who steps forward,” Arvenash says.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“They want a reason to prove themselves.”

Arvenash replies.

“To whom?” I asked confused.

“To themselves.” He responds.

The shouting grows louder for a moment, then collapses into confused murmurs.

The noise dissolves into nothing with time, leaving only the echo of what could have become something worse.

Arvenash opens his eyes.

“That,” he says quietly, “is why a leader is needed in every situation.”

I turn toward him.

“When people are frightened,” he continues, “they look for direction, when they do not find it, they turn on one another, not out of cruelty but out of confusion.”

“So, the guards created chaos to see if someone would rise as a leader?” I ask.

“Yes.” He replies.

“And no one did.” I said almost to myself.

“No one understood the moment,” Arvenash says, “No one recognized that silence is not the same as order, without a voice to anchor them, they drifted.”

I sit slowly, absorbing the weight of his words.

“A leader,” Arvenash says, “is not the loudest man in the room, he is the one who sees the direction before others do, he is the one who steps forward when others hesitate and without such presence, even good people lose their path.”

The corridor grows quiet again and the guards resume their measured steps.

“Chaos,” Arvenash says, “is not born from evil, it is born from absence.”

I breathe out slowly.

“And what if the wrong person steps forward?” I ask.

“Then the chaos takes a different shape,” he says, “But at least it has shape, the worst chaos is the kind that has no center at all.”

The morning light shifts across the floor.

The dungeon hums with a rhythm I am only beginning to understand.

Arvenash rests his head back against the wall, his voice lowers.

“There is a story,” he says. “I heard it from soldiers who returned broken and read fragments of it in Tahl’s archives, a man from Deravshkar once told me his regrets, the priests of Sahradun recorded the final days in their own way and when you place all the pieces together, the truth becomes clear.”

I lean forward to listen.

“It happened in the vast jungles of Sahradun,” Arvenash says, “A place where the air is thick enough to drink and the trees grow so tall they hide the sky, Mirzun and Deravshkar had marched deep into those jungles during the war, both sides lost their commanders in the first clash of swords, no one stepped forward to lead, and then the war ended.”

“No one told them it ended,” I whisper.

“No,” Arvenash says. “No one knew peace was signed and the fighting was over, the message never reached them so they kept fighting shadows, kept burning villages.”

They kept raiding for supplies because their own realms had not paid them in months.”

“And Sahradun?” I ask.

“Sahradun believed the war was over so their troops were resting and their gates were open, their people were rebuilding, they were caught off guard when Mirzun and Deravshkar marched into each other in their territory.” He replied.

I feel a coldness settle in my chest.

“Why did they keep fighting?” I ask.

“Because no one told them to stop,” Arvenash says, “Because the leaders were eliminated, greed filled the silence where leadership

should have been, they fought for plunder or perhaps for habit, they fought because chaos had become their commander.”

He pauses.

“The survivors gave it a name, they called it the Battle of the Blind Boars.” He adds after a moment.

“Why that name?” I ask.

“Because the soldiers charged through the jungle without direction,” Arvenash says, “They trampled everything in their path they fought without purpose, and they proved that savagery almost always defeats civilization.”

The corridor feels colder.

“By the time the time the battle ended,” Arvenash says, “One of the greatest realms was stripped of civilization, Queen Nivara was defeated by an army of chaos, and what remained of her army joined the boars soon.”

He closes his eyes.

“Sahradun is now nothing but trees without a certain leader, a realm that was declared a threat for all of civilization.”

“So, the armies never returned to justice?” I asked softly.

“Why would they ever return?” Arvenash replied, “They raided whatever they desired, claimed which ever woman they wanted and killed whoever stood in their way.”

“And no one can stop an army without a head?” I asked.

“Many tried to bring Sahradun back to order,” Arvenash said gently, “Tahl send peace offers, King Thamir sent his army after their previous army raided one of their villages and King Orzand sent troops after Mirzun’s new army failed but none of them were able to bring order to an army of chaos without a leader.”

“But this means that chaos is stronger than order.” I whispered terrified.

“It always is,” Arvenash replied, “Building order is difficult but destroying everything is easier than building it.”

“How can two fronts fail facing the boars?” I asked shocked.

“Because they didn’t know what kind of a chaos they faced,” Arvenash replied, “A chaos without commands is a chaos without a face.”

“And that is the worst form of chaos.” I replied.

“Yes,” Arvenash replied, “A chaos without form is not something you charge into, it is something you try to keep away.”

The morning continues, but something in my head has changed with what I heard, a great civilization crumbled by an army of savages.

The morning fades slowly, as if reluctant to leave, the pale disk climbs higher, but its light never reaches the floor fully.

It hovers near the ceiling, thin and distant, like a memory that refuses to settle.

The corridor grows quieter after the chaos.

The guards resume their measured steps, and the prisoners return to their murmurs and yet something in the air has shifted.

The silence feels heavier, shaped by the absence of a leader who could have calmed the storm.

I sit with my back against the wall, letting the cold seep through my spine, my thoughts drift to the Battle of the Blind Boars, to the soldiers

who fought long after peace had been signed,  
to Sahradun that was burned to the ground by  
an army of barbarians that didn't even have a  
reason to fight.

Arvenash remains still, his eyes half closed,  
but I know he is awake, he listens to the  
dungeon the way others listen to the wind.  
Every sound carries meaning for him and  
every silence holds a message.

A metal bowl strikes stone somewhere down  
the corridor.

The sound echoes, sharp and hollow.

A prisoner curses under his breath, another  
whispers a prayer, the dungeon absorbs  
everything.

“They are reducing the intervals,” Arvenash says quietly.

“What intervals?” I ask.

“Food, water, light and even sound, they are adjusting the rhythm to see how we respond.”

I listen carefully, he is right.

The guards used to pass every hour, now the gaps stretch longer.

The silence between their steps grows wider, like a rope being pulled slowly apart.

“Why do they do this?” I ask.

“To see who breaks first,” Arvenash says. “To see who adapts or resists.”

“And what about us?” I ask.

“We observe, our surroundings” he says.

“Understanding it is the first form of resistance.”

A faint tremor runs through the stones beneath us, it is not an earthquake, it is the movement of something heavy above. Perhaps a gate, a cart or a gathering of fortress soldiers.

The dungeon breathes with the world above it.

Hours pass and the light shifts.

The air grows warmer, then cooler again.

Time loses its edges.

I begin to notice patterns I had missed before.

The guards walk in pairs during the morning,  
but alone in the afternoon.

The prisoners speak more softly after midday.

The corridor grows restless before nightfall.

Arvenash watches me without speaking.

“You are learning,” he says.

“I am trying.” I speak.

“That is enough.” He replies.

A guard stops outside our cell.

He looks at us through the bars, his  
expression is unreadable.

He holds a small board in his hand, covered in markings I cannot see clearly. He studies us for a moment, then moves on.

“What was that?” I whisper.

“A smaller form of glowing board,” Arvenash says, “They are tracking our behavior.”

“For what purpose?” I ask.

“To decide who is useful.” He replies.

The word settles heavily in my chest.

The dungeon hums again, a prisoner coughs violently another mutters something about water and a third begins to sing softly to himself, a broken melody that rises and falls like a dying flame.

Arvenash opens his eyes fully.

“Listen,” he says.

“To what?” I ask.

“To the absence.”

I close my eyes and try to hear what he hears.

At first, there is nothing but then, slowly I begin to notice the spaces between the sounds.

The pauses, the gaps and the moments where the dungeon holds its breath.

“They are waiting,” I say.

“Yes,” Arvenash replies. “They want to see who speaks first.”

“For what reason?” I ask.

“To measure influence.” He replies.

I feel a chill run through me.

“Influence?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says. “They want to know who the others listen to, who they follow, who they fear and who they trust.”

“And if they find someone?” I ask.

“They remove him for good,” Arvenash says,

“Or worse.”

The thought unsettles me, I look down the corridor, imagining the prisoners, the guards and the silent watchers behind the walls.

“Do they think we are leaders?” I ask.

“They think we are possibilities,” Arvenash says. “That is enough.”

The afternoon deepens.

The light fades again, though the day is not yet over, the dungeon grows colder.

The stones seem to tighten around us, as if the walls themselves are listening.

A faint sound drifts from the far end of the corridor, it is not a cry nor a shout but something softer.

A voice speaking quietly, almost tenderly, a woman’s voice, It echoes faintly, then disappears.

I turn to Arvenash.

“What was that?” I ask frightened.

“A memory,” he says. “Or a ghost or a prisoner who still believes someone is listening.”

The sound lingers in my mind long after it fades away.

Arvenash closes his eyes again.

“Even in places like this,” he says, “people hold on to the voices they remember.”

I sit in silence, letting the afternoon settle around us, the dungeon breathes.

The world above moves and the pale disk continues its slow climb across the sky.

And somewhere in the distance, a woman's voice echoes again, softer this time, like a thread pulled.

The afternoon thins into something quieter.

The light fades without warning, as if the sun has slipped behind a curtain, the dungeon grows colder, and the stones beneath us seem to tighten, drawing the air inward.

A guard walks past our cell with a torch in hand, the flame flickers, casting long shadows across the corridor.

He pauses for a moment, studying us through the bars, then continues without a word.

His footsteps echo for a long time after he is gone.

Arvenash watches the torchlight disappear.

“They are preparing for night,” he says.

“How can you tell?” I ask.

“Their movements change, their silence changes, even their breathing changes.”

I listen carefully, he is right.

The dungeon has a different rhythm now, the guards walk more slowly.

The prisoners speak less, the air feels heavier, as if the night itself is descending through the cracks in the ceiling.

A faint sound drifts from somewhere far down the corridor, it is not the woman's voice from earlier, this sound is lower, rougher, almost like someone whispering to themselves.

The words are too soft to understand.

“What is he saying?” I ask.

“He is reminding himself that he is still alive,” Arvenash says.

The answer chills me more than the cold.

A bowl is pushed through the bars of a cell nearby, the prisoner inside drags it toward himself with trembling hands.

The scraping sound echoes through the corridor, it is the only sound for a long time.

I shift my position, trying to ease the ache in my back, the stones are unforgiving.

The air tastes of iron and damp earth.

Arvenash remains still.

“You are thinking too long,” he says.

“I did not know there are time limits to thoughts.” I respond.

“There are, you must not let others recognize when you are thinking.” He says politely.

I close my eyes, the silence presses against me, it is not empty.

It is full of things I do not want to hear, my own doubts, my own fears and my own memories.

“Do you ever think of home?” I ask.

“No,” Arvenash says. “Home is a place that changes when you are not there to see it.”

I open my eyes.

“What do you think of, then?” I ask.

“Patterns,” he says. “Rhythms, the way people behave when they believe no one is watching.”

“And what do you see here?” I ask.

“A place designed to reveal the truth.” He replies.

“What truth?” I frown.

“The truth of who you are when everything else is taken away.” He leans forward.

The corridor darkens further, the last traces of daylight fade from the stones, the torches along the walls burn more brightly now, their flames dancing in the stale air.

A prisoner begins to cry softly, another tells him to be quiet and a third mutters something about the guards listening.

The dungeon absorbs every sound.

Arvenash shifts slightly, the first movement he has made in a long time.

“Night is when the mind becomes dangerous,” he says. “It wanders, it remembers and it invents.”

I feel the truth of that settling into me.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“During the day, your eyes distract you, at night, there is nothing to see.” He replies.

The corridor grows colder still, the torches flicker and the air thickens.

A memory rises in me without warning.

A face, a voice, a moment I had buried long ago, I push it away, but it returns, sharper than before.

“Don’t fight me!” the voice in my head murmurs, “I’m you!”

Arvenash watches me.

“You see,” he says quietly. “Night reveals what you try to hide.”

I look down at my hands, they tremble slightly.

“Is that why they change the rhythm?” I ask.

“Yes,” Arvenash says. “They want to know who gives in to their own mind first.”

The dungeon hums again, a low vibration that seems to come from the stones themselves.

It is not a sound, it is a feeling, a reminder that the world above continues, even if we cannot see it.

“We are going to die in here.” The voice in my head whispers.

Arvenash closes his eyes.

“Night is also when lessons take root,” he says. “The mind is softer, the heart is more open so the truth is harder to ignore.”

I sense that he is preparing to speak again.

The torches burn lower, the corridor grows still, the prisoners fall silent one by one, as if the darkness has pressed a hand over their mouths.

Arvenash opens his eyes.

“I remember another story,” he says. “This one is different, it is not about war, it is about desire, and the destruction that follows when a man tries to walk two paths at once.”

I feel the air shift around us.

“The story of the Prince of Kelvard,” he says.

The name alone carries weight.

The night deepens.

And the lesson waits.

Through the fabric of the day.

Night settles slowly, as if reluctant to claim the dungeon and the last traces of daylight fade from the stones, the torches along the corridor burn lower, their flames trembling in the stale air.

The silence deepens until it feels like a presence of its own, pressing against the walls, filling the spaces between breaths.

Arvenash sits with his hands folded loosely in his lap.

His eyes are open, but they do not search the darkness, they rest within it, as if the night is an old companion he has learned to understand.

I wait, sensing that he is preparing to speak again, the air around us feels heavier, shaped by something unspoken.

The corridor seems to lean closer.

“It happened after the peace between Kelvard, Mirzun and Zarim,” Arvenash says, “A fragile peace, held together by signatures and promises, but not by trust, the wounds of the war were still fresh and the soil had not yet

forgotten the taste of the blood that had drunk.”

He pauses, letting the silence settle.

“The prince of Kelvard was young, handsome, and admired, he had been raised to inherit a realm that had survived only through caution and diplomacy, his mother, Queen Lusesta, ruled with a steady hand, she believed in restraint and balance, she believed in peace.”

Arvenash’s voice lowers.

“But the prince believed in other things.” He continues after a moment of pause.

The torchlight flickers, casting long shadows across the floor.

“He fell in love with two princesses,”

Arvenash says. “One was the daughter of King Thamir of Mirzun and the other was the only daughter of King Kalthaer of Zarim, both realms had suffered during the war.”

I feel the tension in the story tightening like a rope.

“The prince did not choose,” Arvenash says, “He courted both, he made promises in two directions, he believed he could keep both paths open, he believed love could exist without consequence.”

Arvenash closes his eyes briefly.

“But a man cannot walk two paths at once.”

He continues when the flame reflects from his pupils.

The corridor grows colder.

“When the truth reached Mirzun and Zarim,” Arvenash says, “the peace shattered, King Thamir felt insulted and King Kalthaer felt betrayed, so the two realms joined forces and marched toward Kelvard.”

I swallow hard.

“What did Kelvard do?” I ask.

“Kelvard could not survive such an attack,” Arvenash says. “Their army were small, their walls were thin and their people were tired,

Queen Lusesta knew this better than most, she understood that resistance would destroy her realm.”

He pauses.

“So, she made a choice.”

The silence deepens.

“She sacrificed her eldest son,” Arvenash says, “She sent him to The Battle of the Split Heart with a small army with no chance to win and she closed the gates behind him, but the prince was too young to understand he was offered for peace.”

The image strikes me like a blow.

“The prince fought bravely,” Arvenash says.

“But bravery cannot overcome two realms united by anger, he was defeated and captured, then executed by mutual agreement.”

I feel my breath catch.

“How?” I ask.

Arvenash’s voice becomes almost a whisper.

“They tied him between two ships,” he says.

“One ship from Mirzun, the other from Zarim, when the ships departed for their homelands, they tore him apart.”

The torches flicker violently, as if disturbed by the memory.

“The sea carried what remained of him,” Arvenash says. “And the peace that followed was built on the silence of a man who tried to love two women.”

He looks at me.

“Having a wife is good,” he says. “But overdoing something good can turn it into a nightmare, drink a sip of wine and you’ll be happy, drink a barrel and death is a certainty.”

The dungeon feels colder than before.

“And so, the prince believed he could hold two hearts met his end,” Arvenash says. “A man who tries to walk on two paths simultaneously will be forced to act as two men like what happened to the poor prince.”

The silence that follows is heavy and absolute.

I sit with the story, letting its weight settle into me, the night presses closer, the torches burn lower and the dungeon breathes in slow, steady rhythms.

Arvenash closes his eyes.

“Remember this,” he says. “A man must choose his path, if he does not, the world will choose for him.”

The night deepens as the words settle.

And I feel something inside me shift, quiet and irreversible.

The night grows deeper, settling over the  
dungeon like a second layer of stone.

The torches fight until their last breath to keep  
the corridors lit, but their resistance is  
weakening every moment.

The air grows colder, and the silence thickens  
until it feels almost solid.

Arvenash rests against the wall with his eyes  
closed, but I know he is not asleep.

His breathing is steady, he is giving the night  
space to settle.

I sit with my back against the opposite wall,  
my thoughts circling the stories he has told.  
The Battle of the Blind Boars.

The prince of Kelvard.

Two tragedies born from two different kinds of absence.

One from the absence of leadership the other from the absence of choice.

The dungeon hums softly, a low vibration that seems to come from the stones themselves.

“This is the sound of a place that has seen too much and remembers everything.” The playful voice in my head speaks with a serious tone.

I draw my knees closer to my chest.

“Arvenash,” I say quietly.

He opens his eyes.

“Yes.”

“Do you think the prince deserved what happened to him?”

Arvenash studies me for a long moment.

“Deserve is a dangerous word,” he says. “The world does not give men what they deserve, it gives them what their choices create.”

I look down at my hands.

“He did not choose,” I say.

“He chose not to choose,” Arvenash replies.

“And that is more than a certain choice.”

The silence stretches between us.

“Do you think he loved them both?” I ask.

“Love is sacred when it aims for one woman,” Arvenash says. “But even love can turn into a

nightmare if you overdo it just like everything else that is good for the soul if kept under control but is a horrifying experience if not.”

His words settle into my mind like stones dropped into deep water.

The torchlight flickers and the corridor grow colder.

I close my eyes and let the darkness press against me, the stories echo in my mind.

The dungeon grows quieter still.

The prisoners have fallen silent.

Even the guards walk more softly now, as if the night has pressed its weight upon them as well.

Arvenash shifts slightly.

“Phlinter,” he says.

“Yes.” I answer immediately.

“You asked me earlier how to counter a structure like this, how to resist pressure and remain yourself.”

I look up.

“The answer is simple,” he says. “You must know who you are before they try to tell you.”

The words strike something deep inside me.

“A man who does not know himself,”

Arvenash continues, “is easy to break, easy to bend and easy to use but a man who knows

his purpose cannot be moved, even in a place like this.”

I breathe slowly.

“And what is my purpose?” I ask.

“That,” Arvenash says, “is what you must decide, before the world chooses for you.”

The silence that follows is heavy and absolute.

I sit with his words, letting them settle into the deepest parts of me.

The dungeon fades.

The torches dim, the world narrows to the cold stones beneath me and the quiet truth inside my chest.

I do not know my purpose yet, but I know I must find it, I know I must choose.

The night deepens, the torches burn low, the dungeon breathes.

Arvenash closes his eyes.

“Sleep,” he says softly. “Tomorrow will come whether you are ready or not.”

I lean back against the wall, the cold presses through my spine, my eyes grow heavy.

The last thing I hear before sleep takes me is the faint hum of the dungeon, steady and patient, as if it is waiting to see what I will become...

## • Chapter Ten

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The morning arrives without a sound.

Not the usual footsteps nor the clatter of bowls and not the distant coughs or muttered prayers from the other cells.

Only a stillness so complete it feels unnatural, as if the dungeon itself has been ordered to remain silent.

I open my eyes slowly.

The pale disk has risen, but its light hangs motionless on the wall, thin and cold.

The air feels heavier than before, even my breath seems too loud.

Arvenash sits with his back straight against the stone, his hands resting on his knees, his eyes are open, calm and unblinking.

He listens to the silence with the same attention he gives to danger.

“It is too quiet,” I whisper.

“Yes,” he says. “This is not the quiet of rest, it is the quiet of decision.”

The silence does not lift, it deepens.

Hours pass without change.

No guards, no movement and no sound.

The dungeon feels emptied of life, even the stones seem to wait.

My thoughts begin to wander, then circle back on themselves, the silence presses against my skull until I can hear my own heartbeat.

I try to steady my breathing, but the quiet makes every inhale feel like a mistake.

Arvenash watches me.

“Do not let the silence choose your thoughts,” he says. “Choose them yourself.”

I nod, though my chest feels tight.

At noon, the silence finally breaks.

Two soldiers appear at the cell door.

Their armor is darker than the usual guards, their faces hidden behind metal masks that reflect the torchlight.

They do not speak at first, they simply stand there, staring at us through the bars.

Then one of them unlocks the door.

“Stand.” He says with a confident tone.

Arvenash rises with steady grace, I rise slower, my legs are stiff from the cold floor.

My heart beats faster than I want it to.

“You are to be presented to the High Table,” the soldier says.

The words strike me harder than the cold ever has, my breath catches and my hands tremble.

Arvenash glances at me.

“Steady,” he says softly. “Fear is loud, do not let them hear it.”

The soldiers step aside and gesture for us to walk, we follow them into the corridor.

Every cell we pass is empty.

Not silent simply empty.

The doors hang open, the chains lie untouched, the straw is undisturbed.

The bowls are gone, it is as if no one ever was here, as if the voices, the cries, the coughing, the whispers were all illusions.

A chill runs through me.

“Were we alone?” I whisper.

Arvenash does not answer but his silence is enough.

We walk in a long line of emptiness.

The soldiers do not allow us to speak.

When I try to ask a question, one of them strikes me across the mouth with the back of his hand, the pain is sharp and immediate, I taste blood.

“No speaking,” he says.

Arvenash looks at me, not with pity, but with warning.

We climb a narrow staircase that spirals upward.

The air grows warmer.

The walls widen, the sound of machinery hums faintly behind the stones.

The fortress begins to reveal itself.

The walls are lined with metal pipes that pulse with faint light, strange devices sit on tables, humming softly.

A metal bird hangs from the ceiling, its wings half constructed, gears exposed, its glass eyes staring at nothing.

It looks like a creature waiting for breath.

A door we pass glows faintly from beneath, as if a fire burns behind it, but the light is too steady, too white to be flame.

I stare too long.

A soldier pushes me forward.

“Keep walking.” He shouts.

We walk for what feels like hours.

The fortress is enormous, a labyrinth of stone and metal, old architecture fused with new inventions.

The air smells of oil, ink, and heated metal. Somewhere far above, a machine whirs softly, like a distant heartbeat.

The soldiers remain silent.

Arvenash remains calm and I remain afraid.

We pass a long hall lined with tall windows.

Through them, I see the sky turning orange, then red, evening approaches.

The fortress grows colder as the light fades.

At the end of the hall, a final staircase rises toward a darker level of the fortress.

“Walk!” the soldier says.

At the top of the staircase, a long corridor stretches ahead, lit by torches that burn without sound, the air feels different here. Thinner, Sharper, as if the walls themselves are listening.

Arvenash slows his pace.

“This is the High Table’s floor,” he says quietly.

The soldiers tighten their grip on their weapons as we get close.

We walk forward.

The corridor ahead is long and narrow, lit by torches that burn without sound.

Their flames do not flicker, they stand perfectly still, as if held in place by an unseen hand, the air is colder here, sharper, carrying a faint metallic scent that settles on the tongue.

The soldiers walk behind us, their steps measured and identical.

Their armor does not clatter, their breathing does not break rhythm.

They move like parts of a single machine.

Arvenash walks with steady steps.

His posture is calm, his eyes move with quiet precision, studying every detail of the corridor, I try to match his composure, but my legs feel unsteady.

The silence presses against my ears until I can hear my own heartbeat.

We pass a series of tall doors, each one carved from dark stone.

None of them are marked, none of them are open.

Behind one, I hear a faint humming, low and constant, like a machine turning slowly somewhere in the dark.

Behind another, a soft clicking sound repeats at regular intervals, too precise to be natural.

Arvenash glances at the doors.

“This level is not for prisoners,” he murmurs.

The soldier behind us strikes the back of my shoulder with the flat of his hand.

“I said no speaking.” He shouts.

Arvenash lowers his gaze but does not apologize.

We continue walking.

The corridor widens into a hall lined with tall windows, through them, I see the sky darkening into deep red.

The pale disk sinks behind the fortress walls,  
casting long shadows across the stone floor.  
The light feels distant, as if the world outside  
is slipping away.

A metal structure stands in the center of the  
hall, it resembles a cage, but its bars are  
made of thin rods that glow faintly with white  
light, inside it, a sphere of glass hovers above  
a pedestal, turning slowly without any visible  
support.

The air around it vibrates softly.

I slow my steps, unable to look away.

A soldier grips my arm and forces me forward.

“Move!” He said.

Arvenash's voice reaches me quietly.

“Do not let curiosity betray you.”

We leave the hall and enter another corridor,  
narrower and darker.

The torches here burn with a pale blue flame.  
The walls are lined with pipes that pulse with  
faint light, as if carrying something alive  
through the fortress.

The soldiers remain silent.

We pass a door with a thin line of white light  
glowing beneath it.

The light pulses slowly, like a heartbeat.

A faint whispering sound comes from inside, too soft to understand, I feel the hairs on my arms rise.

Arvenash's eyes narrow slightly.

“This place is older than it appears,” he says softly.

The soldier behind him raises his hand, but Arvenash falls silent before the blow lands.

We continue walking.

The corridor ends at a massive archway carved from black stone.

Beyond it lies a staircase that rises toward a pair of towering doors.

The doors are made of obsidian, veined with white lines that glow faintly like frozen lightning.

The air around them feels colder, heavier, as if the stone itself carries judgment.

The soldiers gesture for us to climb.

Arvenash steps forward without hesitation.

I follow, my legs trembling.

Each step feels heavier than the last, the silence deepens, the air grows colder.

The torches dim as we approach the doors, their flames shrinking into thin lines of light.

At the top of the staircase, the soldiers move ahead of us.

They place their hands on a majestic door  
made of some sort of wood I've never seen in  
my life.

The doors open without a sound.

The chamber beyond is vast.

A long table made of obsidian stretches  
across the room, its surface polished to a  
mirror, white veins run through it like rivers  
trapped beneath glass.

Torches burn along the walls, their flames  
steady and silent.

Five figures sit behind the table.

Two sit apart from the others.

A woman in a dark grey silk dress, her golden hair falling like molten gold, her eyes blue as the open sea.

Beside her, a man with short grey hair and a trimmed beard, dressed in dark brown clothes, his posture rigid, his gaze sharp.

The other three sit together.

A woman in a dark blue dress, her brown hair braided neatly, her green eyes calm and calculating.

A man with long black hair, dressed in dark green, his fingers resting lightly on the table.

And a broader man in dark red, his expression unreadable, his presence heavy.

We are led to the center of the room.

The soldiers step back.

The chamber holds its breath.

The woman in the grey silk dress rises slowly.

Her sleeves fall like smoke around her arms.

She spreads her arms wide, her presence  
filling the room.

Her blue eyes settle on us.

“Welcome,” she says.

The words drift away through the window as I  
trace them to the evening light that shines  
copper on the horizon...