

## chapter 2

Queen Aurelia stood on the balcony of her room, staring at the sky. She looked down at the wasteland that surrounded the city from each direction.

"May this Ostendum bring us the chosen one," she prayed as she closed her eyes and raised her hand in the air.

The queen put on her cape and opened the door. She walked rapidly behind the Malachar woman, the prayer still repeating in her head.

"All the signs are aligned. A Malachar born from the royal blood, two suns shining bright, when all hope begins to vanish. The chosen one will be born to end our planet's barren and lifeless state." The Malachar woman said to the queen.

"Quiet," the queen ordered. "Do not tempt fate, pray in your thoughts."

They arrived at the Ostendum room, drawings of the prophecy were drawn all over the walls. A white haired baby born under two suns. A black-haired man walking the wasteland. Trees and flowers rose behind him. A chandelier with a hundred candles lit up the room, the prayers of Malachar priests were loud and clear.

"May the promised one rise before our light fades.  
O First sun, guide the chosen to us, and let hope rise with your light.  
O Second Sun, reveal their path, and let destiny be fulfilled.  
May the promised one rise before our light fades."

A Malachar woman sat in the middle of the room, she held her pregnant stomach and screamed in pain. Her husband stood beside her, he tried to comfort her but the prayers covered every word he said.

Queen Aurelia approached the pregnant woman and sat beside her. She ran her fingers down her hair and shushed. "Calm down sister, it is almost time." The queen said.

The queen looked at the Malachar doctors and gave them a nod to begin the birth. The prayers got louder and the candle flames got bigger with each passing second. The screams couldn't be heard anymore, only the Malachar priests whose voices reached the wasteland. The two suns of Vaelor hung in the sky outside the tall windows of the Ostendum room, their light falling through the glass in two distinct beams that crossed each other on the stone floor. The priests had chosen this room for that reason alone, on the day of the ceremony the light of both suns reached the centre of the floor at the same hour. It had been calculated generations ago and the room had been built around that calculation. The crossing of the two beams was where the birthing chair sat. Where the child would first open its eyes, the first thing it would see would be the combined light of both suns. If the prophecy was true, if the chosen one was to be born of Malachar blood under the gaze of both suns, then this was the only room on Vaelor where it could happen.

Aurelia had stood in this room for multiple Ostendums before this one. Many times the light had crossed on the floor. Many times the baby was not the chosen one. She did not allow

herself to think about that now. The baby was finally born after what felt like hours, silence now filled the castle. The doctor handed the baby to the priests with care.

"You did well, Evelyn." Queen Aurelia said, then kissed her sister on the head. "You will be a wonderful mother." The queen added.

Evelyn didn't respond, her face was filled with fear. She grabbed her husband's hand and pulled him close. "I want to see my baby."

"We have to wait, you know that." The husband responded.

She turned to the queen and begged her to hold her baby. The queen held her hand and continued to brush her hair with her fingers. "Soon." The queen said.

"It's a boy." The priest said, followed by the prayer of each priest.

"May the promised one rise before our light fades.

O First sun, guide the chosen to us, and let hope rise with your light.

O Second Sun, reveal their path, and let destiny be fulfilled.

May the promised one rise before our light fades."

The priest held the baby close and poured water gently over his head. The priests then took turns drying the baby's head while praying. The baby was held near the light, he screamed and cried from the heat. A gasp was let out of every single priest.

"The baby is," The priestess said while she covered the baby in his blanket, "Vaelus."

The queen removed her hand away from her sister instantly and turned away. "Send it to the pits." The queen said as she walked away.

The husband ran after her and fell to his knees beside the queen, "Can we just see him? I beg you." He shouted.

"It will only be harder that way." The queen responded and continued to walk away.

The husband turned to his wife to ask her to convince her sister, but all he saw was a broken woman with tears running down her face. She couldn't talk or scream, she just sat and stared at the baby covered in the blanket. The husband stood and blocked the doorway.

"I will not let you send my son away." The husband shouted. He grabbed his white pistol from his side and aimed it at the queen. "Give me my son." He said as he collected himself.

Queen Aurelia stood and met the barrel of the pistol without so much as a flinch. Her expression remained calm, as though the weapon pointed at her was nothing. She continued walking closer to him then past him. The husband turned to face the unfazed queen that walked past him only to the royal guard standing a foot above him. The husband's eyes rose slowly to match the royal guard, but before he could reach them the royal guard unarmed him and punched him to the ground.

The royal guard aimed her rifle at the husband. "Your orders my queen?"

"Leave him, he is a grieving father. Make sure the baby leaves the castle and is sent to the Vaelus."

The royal guard put away her rifle and bowed to the queen. The priest brought the covered baby to the royal guard and handed him to her. Evelyn couldn't do anything but reach for her baby, but she was too weak to move. The royal guard took the baby and walked out of the castle; she searched for the Vaelus elder, Lucius, among the working Vaelus.

Lucius was standing near the city walls, Vaelus were spread beneath him, breaking rocks and stones to reinforce the city. He saw the royal guard as she approached him holding something small covered in a bright red blanket. He knew it only meant one thing, the Vaelus would increase one more. One more soul condemned the pits, one more slave for the Malachar to order, one more poor soul who was deemed less, the moment he was born. As the royal guard came closer, his shoulders sagged. Deep lines carved into his face as his eyes lingered on the infant, filled with a pity that years had never managed to dull.

"You are to take this baby with you." The royal guard said without emotion in her voice.

Lucius looked her in the eyes that were obscured behind a metal helmet and a thousand words came to his mind, but none came out. He held out his arms as the royal guard rested the baby down on them. Lucius removed the blanket from the baby's face, he gazed at his beauty and innocence which the Malachar saw as a curse. He held him close to his chest and sang him a lullaby. The royal guard observed this but no emotion was felt by her, all she saw were curses who doomed their planet.

The royal guard returned to the queen's room, she knelt down on one knee and removed her helmet. A hideous scar ran down the right side of her face, the injury took her eye with it. She placed the helmet beside her. "It is done, my queen."

Queen Aurelia sat beside a small table, on it were empty fruit bowls and a bottle of Malachar wine made from aged cactus juice. She placed her wine glass on the table and looked at her royal guard.

"Stand, Sylvie." The queen said

Sylvie held her helmet and stood. The queen slammed her fist on the table, dropping everything on it.

"We have had ten children of royal Malachar blood in the last twenty years, four of which are mine. I have sent my daughter to the pits, all for the prophecy." The queen ranted angrily, she stood and went to the balcony. She gazed at the barren wasteland. "Hundreds of years this soil had remained dead, all because a cursed Vaelus ruled this kingdom." she said more calmly. "Do you think we will live to see the chosen one Sylvie?" The queen asked.

"I hope so my queen, we have to believe that he will come at the right time." Sylvie said with confidence as she firmed her grip on her helmet.

"Then let's pray for that time to be soon." The queen said. "Go tell the council that the welcome parade meeting will begin shortly."

Sylvie wore her helmet once more and left the room as she bowed to her queen. Sylvie walked through the hallways until she reached the room of Lord Hull, who was responsible for the city's food and water. Sylvie knocked on his door three times, each one louder than the one before.

"One second." Lord Hull shouted from inside, he sat at his desk surrounded by paper in every direction. He scratched his head through his mane of long black curls that framed his face, wild and untamed, spreading around his head like a storm cloud. He walked to the door, stepping on the pieces of paper that covered the floor and opened the door.

"A council meeting in fifteen minutes." Sylvie said and walked away instantly.

"Charming as ever, lady Sylvie." Lord Hull said as he rolled his eyes.

Lord Hull grabbed his notebook and his Malachar pistol, he held the pistol from the barrel and without caution as he never used one in his life. He left the room and proceeded to the council room, he walked swiftly to be the first one there only to find Lord Cassius, the high steward present and sat in the chair closest to the queen's chair. On the contrary to Lord Hull, Lord Cassius was neatly dressed and took great care of his appearance.

"Twin light upon you, Lord Cassius." Hull greeted him with courtesy, yet the slight tightening of his jaw and the chill in his eyes betrayed a dislike that years of working together had built. He took the chair next to Cassius.

"And upon you, Lord Hull." Lord Cassius responded, keeping that tension between them.

"You took extra food this seventurn." Lord Hull said in an accusing tone.

"The people needed hope," Lord Cassius responded calmly. "And more importantly something to ease their minds after two failed Ostendums." He continued.

"If our food storage emptied, would that ease your mind." Hull said with a slightly louder, more aggressive voice.

"My job is to keep order in this city, to keep twenty thousand Malachar going despite being surrounded by a barren wasteland on a dying planet. Cassius said, matching his tone to Hull's. "The Malachar raid will arrive any day in this seventurn, so don't worry." He added as he recovered his composure.

"I pray you're right, as we are doomed otherwise." Hull whispered.

The council room door opened once more, Queen Aurelia entered with a crown on her head and the black cape waving behind her. Sylvie entered behind her, with the rifle in her hands. The queen sat at the head of the table on a chair that was slightly bigger and more

comfortable than the others, Sylvie sat to her right opposite Hull and Cassius, as the warden of peace.

"Let us begin the meeting." The queen said confidently, grabbing the attention of the council. "The King and the Malachar raid party is expected to arrive any day in this seventurn. I want this parade to be the grandest."

"If I may intervene your grace, our supplies and rations are almost empty. I suggest a more conserved parade." Hull said

"The Malachar raid will bring our resources and supplies as they do every five years. We need not worry, your grace." Cassius said as he gave Hull an arrogant glance.

"What if they don't, remember twenty years ago?" Hull raised his voice slightly. "When the raid failed and people starved to death until we planned another raid." Hull continued.

"Do you not trust our king?" Sylvie said, interrupting Hull.

"Your fear for the city is appreciated Lord Hull, but this parade will be grand." The queen said as everyone went quiet and listened. "My husband has assured me before his travel to the planet Arvum, that it is weak and their technology does not come close to ours. It is also rich in resources, so we plan this to the fullest. The Malachar deserve it." Queen Aurelia added.

"As you wish, your grace." Hull and Cassius responded simultaneously.

"I suggest we keep the Vaelus in the Vaelus pits, for the safety of the Malachar." Sylvie said.

"And who would work and set up this parade?" Cassius asked sarcastically with a laugh.

"They will finish their work and leave as soon as the ship is sighted." The queen said. "May this be the last welcome parade we plan and may the chosen one be born soon." The queen added as she stood up.

The royal council stood up after her and simultaneously bowed their heads. The queen walked out the room as the red sun shone on the back of her cape and Sylvie followed.



Cassius rose back up from his bow, he patted Hull on his back twice. "You can tell the Vaelus the news yourself, as you like them so much." Cassius said.

"I like them as much as I like you, my friend." Hull said as he slapped Cassius's hand away.

Cassius let out a quiet puff of amusement through his nose. "You are the only Malachar that does not believe in the prophecy, I feel sorry for you. No hope, you just live in despair." Cassius said.

"I am a man of science and numbers, I believe only in what I can prove and calculate. I won't waste my time waiting for the chosen one, I will do what I can with what I have." Hull said as he gathered his papers. "You can call it whatever you like, I call it reality." Hull added. He put his papers in his book and walked swiftly out of the room. Lord Hull walked out the castle and scanned the area around him, Malachar were enjoying their day, while Vaelus were gathering their tools to leave the city. He kept looking in every direction as he walked away from the castle until he found Lucius, who was still holding the baby in his hands.

Hull approached Lucius, "Twin light upon you, Lucius." Hull said. He signalled Lucius to follow him to an alley where they wouldn't be seen.

"And upon you, Lord Hull." Lucius greeted him back as he bowed his head and followed him. "It never feels normal being greeted by a Malachar." Lucius added.

"You know I don't believe in their nonsense." Hull said. "Prophecy, magic, chosen ones, it is all just false hope to make their sleep at night easier." Hull added as he shook his head in disbelief.

"Hope is a gift, even if it's not real." Lucius said. "And even if you don't believe it, you still are the only one who treated us with respect. Thank you." Lucius added.

"Of course Lucius," Hull patted Lucius gently on the shoulder. "For all we know, you could be my father. Vaelus sent babies here, just as we do." Hull said with a smile.

"I never had children of my own, fortunately." Lucius laughed with the usual coughs that interrupted.

Hull laughed with Lucius for a few moments before telling him about the parade plans, that they have to leave the city as soon as the ship is sighted. Lucius agreed and bowed his head once more. Lucius got out of the alley and gathered the Vaelus to begin the journey back to the Vaelus pits.

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The moon was full and bright over the Vaelus pits, they had just arrived from the city. Lucius announced the news he had received from Lord Hull with the Vaelus as soon as they entered the pits. Some Vaelus were happy that they would finish their work early, others were sad that they had to make two journeys in the heat of the wasteland. But most Vaelus didn't care, and then there was Varro who threw his tools on the ground and paced away to his sleeping area. He punched the wall multiple times until drops of blood fell from his fists. Darren held his arm with all his strength to stop Varro.

"The one day I actually want to be in the city, I can't." Varro shouted.

"Why do you want to attend the welcome parade that much?" Darren responded.

"When that ship lands, everyone forgets their surroundings and focuses on the Malachar ship." Varro said, he sat on the ground. "For a brief moment I can be like them, I am not a slave anymore. I can cheer and shout and have fun." He added as a tear ran down his face.

Darren sat next to him in silence as he felt the same but didn't know what to say. A rock flew past them and smashed against the wall, Rolfo followed it and sat next to them. They sat under the moon's light, no one knew what to say.

"Is it worth it to do something stupid," Varro broke the silence and paused for a second. "But with a high reward?" Varro added as his wide blue eyes got even wider.

"Depends on the risk." Darren said.

"Depends on the reward." Rolfo said.

"Come closer, I have a plan." Varro grinned as he whispered. He put each arm around each of his friends and pulled them closer. "When the ship is sighted and the Vaelus leave, we will sneak off and stay in the city. What say you?"

Darren pushed Varro's hand off his shoulder. "This isn't something stupid, this is suicide." Darren whispered but with anger in his voice. "You would put all the Vaelus in danger, not just us for a stupid parade." Darren said.

"We are always in danger." Rolfo said

"We will hide our hair and stay in an alley until nightfall and then return here." Varro said as he mapped the plan on the ground between them.

"What about the beasts in the wasteland? Have you thought about those?" Darren interrupted.

"Maybe they won't hear us if it's only us three." Rolfo said with a slight hesitation.

Darren held his head and gave them a stare that he would give madmen. He walked off without adding another word. Varro and Rolfo shared a look, where neither of them knew if they were joking or really committed. Varro turned his gaze to his bloody fist and adrenaline pumped through his body, as it was the first time he felt real excitement.

# chapter 1

Malachar kids were playing with a ball in the city centre, kicking and passing the ball in a circle between them. Until the ball was kicked with too much power, it left that circle. The ball rolled and bounced through the street, the Malachar kids ran behind as they shouted and laughed. It slammed against the back of a Vaelus, the white haired man was crouched on the floor as he fixed a store's wall. He turned around and held the ball with his hands, he looked at where it came from. Then saw the Malachar kids running at him, they waved and shouted for him to throw them back the ball. He stood and walked towards them, their expressions changed. They took a step back, the Vaelus looked at the ball and a smile appeared on his face. He dropped the ball and started juggling it with his legs like he was born to do this. The smile and laughter returned in the kids' faces as they began to cheer.

He held the ball again and rolled it back to the kids, they grabbed the ball and approached him.

"How did you do that?" a Malachar kid asked.

He pointed at his chest. "You're looking at the best ball player in Vaelor," he said proudly.

The kids looked at each other with amusement, "can you show us more tricks?" they asked.

"I have to get back to work," he said as he put a hand on his head.

The kids let out a sigh and ran away except one kid, who held his hand out and looked at the talented Vaelus. The Vaelus knew he shouldn't shake his hands, but he couldn't refuse a handshake from a child. He shook his hand and they shared a quick smile. The kid ran along to rejoin his friends.

Running opposite to the kids were five Malachar soldiers, with their rifles pointed ahead as they shouted "get down on your knees!"

The kids turned around and saw the Vaelus on his knees and his hands on his head, the Malachar soldiers stood around him. Fear struck the

kids as the person they shared a laugh with a moment ago was being detained. The Vaelus was dragged on the floor by his hair until they reached the city gate. His screams gathered the Malachar and the Vaelus around him. Eyes filled with disgust stared at him from every corner, except for the kids eyes which were filled with tears.

Varro stood at the edge of the crowd. He had seen Vaelus punished before, small punishments, the kind that left marks but not bodies. This was different. The man on his knees had done nothing except be what he was in a moment when a child forgot to be afraid. Varro's hand found the handle of the pickaxe at his belt without deciding to and took a step forward. Another Vaelus fingers closed around his wrist from behind, not hard, just present. He didn't pull away. He stood there with their hand on his wrist and watched and did not move.

The crowd split open from the middle and through them walked a Malachar woman and a royal guard next to her. A golden crown rested on her black haired head, a black cape with a bright red sun waved behind her. She stood far away from the Vaelus prisoner, but close enough that she would be heard.

“Banishment to the wastelands or death,” she said as she put her right hand on top of her left.

“Mercy, I have done nothing wrong”. He replied as tears ran down his face.

“I will not repeat myself,” she said

“Banishment is death.” He answered

She turned away, her cape flew around her. “Death then,” she said as she walked away.

The sound of the gun shot echoed through the city and the wasteland around it, his body fell to the floor and his blood ran through the paved ground.

The Malachar left the scene to return to their normal day and the Vaelus left to return to their labor. Varro stood a while longer, he stared at the dead body as it was being thrown out the gates.

“The day will come when these Malachar scum will pay, I swear it.” Varro whispered, his fist squeezed around the pickaxe handle until cracks began to form.

Varro returned to his labor and remained quiet until it was time to leave the city, the Vaelus collected food and water as payment for their work and began the journey back across the wasteland. They collected the body of their brother and loaded it onto one of the carts and covered it with a piece of cloth. No one spoke on the walk back. That was the rule, not a written rule, not one the Malachar had given them, but one the Vaelus had made for themselves over generations of returning from the city with less than they had left with. The Vaelus walked close to each other, their shoulders almost touching. The lantern ahead moved with Lucius's gait, a small, persistent light that seemed to have no business existing in that much darkness. Varro watched it and thought about the man's name, which he had already heard once and was trying to hold onto, the way you try to hold onto something you know you're going to lose. The breeze blew against them as they walked back to the pits, the torturous heat now gone. Lucius led the Vaelus as he did in the morning, but this time with a lantern lighting his path. He walked confidently and surely despite the light covering only a few steps in front of him.

They arrived in front of the Vaelus pits, two lanterns were hung up on the door. Lucius lighted them and the Vaelus grabbed their tools. They began digging a grave to put their brother to rest, the light from the lanterns showed other Vaelus graves next to each other. Each grave was marked with a gravestone with the name of the deceased Vaelus. As they dug the grave, only the howls of monstrous creatures could be heard. Cold winds caused the young Vaelus to shiver as they stood in the vast wasteland. They put the dead Vaelus in the ground and closed the grave.

Lucius stood at the head of the grave and spoke. “May the earth take his body, but never his burden. Let that burden rest with us until no child is

born ashamed of white hair.” Lucius said his name, the Vaelus repeated after him.

They entered the pits, a heavy silence settled over them. Heads hung low, and not a single soul dared to meet another's eyes. Lucius went to his chair and gazed upon it, he took a deep breath and rested his cane on the side of the chair.

“Who wants to hear the story of the great dragon.” Lucius said.

Varro’s head turned towards Lucius, a faint smile appeared on his face.

“Solvaris the unconquered,” Lucius added

The Vaelus' heads raised a few inches and their eyes lit up with a dim sparkle, they walked towards Lucius as he sat on his chair. Half a circle of sat Vaelus surrounded Lucius, right in front of him in the first row was Varro. His legs were crossed and his eyes were glued on Lucius, despite the hard life, he was still sixteen years old and loved story time . The pits went quiet, only the whistling of the wind and the crackling of the fire-lit lanterns could be heard.

“One thousand years ago, Vaelor was a planet with five countries and five rulers. The planet's soil was still alive, trees and plants filled the wasteland. Fields stretched as far as the eye can see, there were enough crops to feed everyone and more. Trees were as high as mountains and rivers ran through the wasteland in every direction.” Lucius said.

The Vaelus began to look at each other and raise their eyebrows, they laughed slightly and turned back to Lucius.

“Vaelor was at peace until the day that Solvaris pierced our skies, he carried a rider on his back. Some say they were from a different planet and others say they were gods that have come to conquer us. Solvaris and his rider burned a whole country to ashes on their first day. They stayed alone in that country for a couple of years, until another country decided to wage war on them. They were of course defeated with ease.” Lucius paused here, as he always did. Not for effect, he was not a man

who performed his stories. He paused because this was the part he had thought about the longest, the part that had kept him awake in his younger years when sleep came less easily than it did now. Two beings from somewhere beyond the sky, landing on a world that had no name for what they were. He could not imagine it and he had tried many times. He suspected that was the point. Some things were not meant to be imagined from the outside.

Varro raised his hand and asked, “what did the dragon look like?”

“He was as big as a castle, each wing was the size of the Vaelus pits. His scales were hard as rocks and almost impenetrable. His teeth and claws could go through the hardest of stones with ease. The colour of the dragon changed with his feelings, he was fiery-red when angry, water-blue when relaxed. Black was the colour that you never want to see as it will be the last thing you saw, Solvaris went black, when furious and only death followed. It is said that Solvaris chose the rider himself, that no one boarded the great dragon without being called. But how would we know, no one from this planet ever came close enough to ask. The rider was described differently in every tale, some said he was black haired, some said his hair changed with the dragon's colours, some even said he had white hair.” Lucius answered.

The Vaelus laughed loudly and began making fun of the story, many laid on their sides and began to sleep. Varro sat in his place, his eyes wide and full of intrigue.

Lucius continued, “Solvaris and his rider shared a strong bond that transcended friendship, they understood each other with a common language. They slept together and flew together, never needed anyone else. The rider wielded a sword made from a metal never seen before on this planet. They say that the sword was made from dark magic, it can only be held by the rider of Solvaris. Only the rightful and worthy may wield the sword. Many tried to steal the sword under the shadows of night, but couldn't lift it. Solvaris soared the skies for hundreds of years after that, no one dared to attack them. They would demand food and servants from the other countries. There were people who worshipped them. At the first sunrise of every spring, the people carried baskets of

fresh bread, honey, and the season's first fruits. They laid their offerings upon the black altar stone and left without looking back, believing the dragon accepted only gifts given without expectation. Five hundred hundred years ago, the three countries joined forces and built a great army. The great war started that day and continued for five years, until they finally killed the rider and injured the dragon. After the rider fell, Solvaris turned black for the first time on vaelor. He burned through the armies and the whole planet was on fire, every river went dry and every field lit up in flames. The wasteland we walk through everyday was what remained of Solvaris's grief" Lucius yawned and began to doze off. Some Vaelus began to leave.

"Then what?" Varro yelled.

Lucius jumped in his chair and stared at Varro. He smiled and adjusted himself to the chair. "The great Solvaris went to a cave and rested there. Any who try to enter the cave never come out alive, the cave is somewhere in the wasteland but none know its location. The dragon was seen soaring the skies every couple of years after the war, until he disappeared. I believe he is waiting for his next rider in the forbidden cave to continue their planetary adventures, to soar amongst space, suns and stars"

Lucius looked at the Vaelus in front of him, all of them were fast asleep except for Varro. He was still awake, his face was filled with wonder. His mouth was open and his eyes were wide. Varro laid back and gazed upon the stars above him, he raised his hand and flew with his fingers between the skies until he reached the moon. His eyes closed gradually until it was completely shut. Lucius laid his head back and closed his eyes.

The next day, two suns rose from the north and spread their light on Vaelor. Varro's eye lids began to burn as the Vaelus pits had no shade but the small sheets of fabric stretched on wooden sticks. Fabric that would eventually burn away after a couple of days. The collective smell of ten thousand Vaelus in open heat, sweat and dust, something sour underneath it all that never fully leaves. The other Vaelus began to wake up, their long hair pure-white. Varro stepped over others who were still asleep, as they were all crunched together all around the arena walls. He

finally reached Lucius, wrinkles all over his weathered skin. His hands were rough and scarred from a long life of labor. Though well into his later years, the old man still carried himself with quiet strength.

“Are you still alive, old man?” Varro asked.

Lucius laughed, an old laugh that carried coughs in the middle. “I was here before all of you and I will be here after you.” He reached for his cane, a strong wooden stick with dragons etched on its sides, “hand me the cane, will you.”

Varro held the cane and helped Lucius up. “Will you tell us the dragon tale again tonight?” Varro looked Lucius in the eyes. “Please,” he said with a high voice which did not stop until he had the answer.

“Fine,” Lucius answered to shut him up, “if we make it back.” he said as a frown came across his face. His eyes went to the floor, at the white-haired Vaelus still sleeping. “Wake everyone up, we have to start our journey to the city.”

Varro woke Vaelus while he searched for Rolfo, his best friend. He finally reached her, he shook her twice. Rolfo had no reaction, he shook her again. She grabbed a rock and threw it at him, “let me sleep” she said while she yawned.

“We have to leave”, he threw the rock back at her. “Or do you want to stay here?” he asked

“Fine, fine” she said. She sat up, intricate braids flowed down her back. “I’m up”

The Vaelus were all awake, they washed their faces and bodies around a well which was in the middle of the arena. The water was almost boiling hot, but the Vaelus showed no reaction to it. They were already accustomed to it, using it everyday to clean and drink. Carts were being filled with hammers, shovels, equipment and tools they would use in their city labor. Lucius walked among them, one hand on the cane supporting him and held him up. The other hand held a bell, he rang that

bell as he walked among them. The bell was sharp and loud as gongs were being struck by strong men. The Vaelus gathered behind him and the bells ringing. They reached the gates of their home, which was more of a prison than a home.

Darren approached Rolfo and Varro from behind. "Wait for me," he reached them and held Varro's shoulder to catch his breath. Standing beside Varro, the difference was impossible to ignore. While Varro had the broad shoulders of a young man, Darren was short for his age. His hair was shorter than most Vaelus but as white as any. "I've been looking for you guys."

"I've been trying to wake the princess over here". Varro said as he put his arm around Darren's shoulders.

Rolfo punched Darren on the shoulder, a powerful yet gentle punch. Darren held his shoulder as he continued to laugh. "He said it, not me".

The gates slowly opened, sand and dust rushed in. Lucius turned to face the Vaelus, his cane struck the floor. The Vaelus went quiet, every Vaelus gave their full attention to the old man who led them through every journey to the city. Lucius gazed at them. His broad shoulders had narrowed with age, but they remained straight.

"The wasteland may look empty at first glance, but it is far from safe. It hides dangers that rarely reveal themselves until it's too late. Wild beasts roam its endless stretches, watching from afar and waiting patiently for one of us to wander too far from the others. The moment someone is left alone, they seize their chance without hesitation. Stay close, Stay together and stay strong." Lucius said.

"He says this every day". Varro mumble while rolled his eyes,

"Yet Vaelus still wander off and die," Darren responded.

The Vaelus began the march to the Malachar city, the wasteland ground beneath them was cracked with patterns like old scars. Skeletons were scattered all over the wasteland. The only sounds heard were the wind

whistling around them. The Vaelus marched through the wastelands in a river of pure white hair. They marched for a couple of hours, at the back of the group, Drusus, his head was above them all and was as wide as two men. A one-eyed beast walked to the side of the Vaelus, not near enough to attack but near enough to be seen. It was thrice the size of a dog with fangs that came out of its mouth, claws that looked like it could cut through stone. Darren shook at the sight of this creature, he walked closer to his friends without breaking eye contact.

“It won't attack when we're together.” said Varro

“I know, but still it looks terrifying.” Darren responded, “why couldn't they build the Vaelus pits closer to the city?” he murmured.

“The Malachar don't want to be near us, unless we're doing their work.” Varro spat on the ground, “bastards.” he shouted.

“Why build the pits in the first place, that's the question you should ask,” Rolfo entered the discussion.

Varro shook his head and clenched his fist. “All for some superstitious crap that bears no proof.”

Varro turned and looked up at Drusus. “What are your thoughts on all this?” He said while walking backwards.

Drusus grunted again and didn't respond.

“No fun,” Varro said and turned back around. His eyes met the horizon. He let out a sigh, “I can see the city.”

Varro had walked this stretch of dead ground every day of his life for as long as he could remember. He knew every cracked pattern in the earth, every hollow where the wind changed direction, every bleached bone the beasts left behind. He had stopped counting the steps between the pits and the city walls years ago. He had never looked at those walls from a distance, before the city swallowed him and put him to work. There was something about the approach, the moment when the walls were close

enough to make out the carvings but far enough that no guard had yet looked at him with contempt, that felt almost like a possibility. Not hope. He had learned early what hope cost a Vaelus. Something smaller than hope. The habit of looking at something beautiful before it reminded you that it wasn't yours.

The Vaelus approached the city walls, built by Vaelus to keep themselves out. The Malachar guards stood in front of the open gates with their rifles in their hands. They were in full Malachar armour with no helmets to show their black hair as a sign of superiority. Lucius stood between the guards and bowed his head, the rest of the Vaelus followed. The guards looked at each other then back at the Vaelus with disgust.

“Do you remember the rules, old man?” the guard asked

“Yes sir,” Lucius answered while still bowing. His body began to shake from the stance he was being kept at.

“Bastards,” whispered Varro.

Darren held Varro's head down preventing him from breaking his bow. The guards signalled to Lucius to go through.

For the first time since he woke up Varro felt the shade, the buildings and sheds blocked the sun. Varro finally opened his eyes fully and took a deep breath through his nose, one without dust and sand. The air smelled like freshly baked bread, as the smoke came out the masonry ovens. Through the bakery windows, rows of golden loaves cooled on wooden racks. Their warm aroma drifted into the street, close enough to taste, yet impossibly far from someone with white hair. Water fountains filled every corner of the city, drops of water sprayed in the air breaking the heat. Varro walked closer to a fountain to feel the touch of cold water, the water glistened only a few steps away. Close enough to hear its gentle ripples, yet as unreachable as the stars. His feet were evenly stood on stone paved slabs rather than the uneven tortuturing sand of the wasteland.

Every Vaelus proceeded to their jobs, Varro was one of the builders. Varro took his bowl of soup and half a loaf of bread, which he took every morning in the past sixteen years before he began his work. He finished his food and started to lay bricks and break stones with a pickaxe. A Malachar guard stood to observe the Vaelus builders. The guard was to ensure that they didn't leave any entry holes in the walls. His rifle was in his hands, which he aimed at any Vaelus who he deemed to be slouching. Varro swung the pickaxe with both hands, burying its iron point into the rock. Chips flew with every strike and dust drifted into the air as the stone slowly yielded.

Varro looked at the rifle in the guards' hand and before a thought crossed his mind, the pickaxe swung wide and bit into the paved slab. The impact shuddered up through his wrists and into his shoulders. He stood there a moment, staring at the fresh gouge in the stone. He didn't move. Didn't breathe. His eyes went to the guard before he had decided to look.

"You dare disfigure the city's ground?" The guard asked as he aimed the rifle at Varro.

Varro regained his breath and his hand squeezed harder around the pickaxe. "It was a mistake, I'll fix it," he responded.

"It was a mistake, sir". The guard said and aimed the rifle at his head.

Varro looked around at the other Vaelus around him and at the Malachar locals looking at them with disgust. He clenched his jaw and squeezed the pickaxe even harder. He stared at the Malachar guard straight in the eyes. The guard stared back with the rifle still aimed at Varro.

"It was a mistake, sir". Varro said.

"Get back to work, and fix that slab now." Lucius said and hit Varro's head with his cane. He turned to the guard and bowed his head, "it won't happen again sir."

The guard lowered his rifle and walked away, with an arrogant smile, as Varro watched him leave. He continued his patrol over the Vaelus while

they built and cleaned the city. The guard reached the royal castles' doors, they were framed with carved stone, etched with red suns and colourful flowers. The guard entered the castle, the walls were filled with Malachar portraits, chandeliers dangled from the ceilings. Laughter and chatting was heard in every room in the castle except the rooms where the Vaelus were cleaning. A scream was heard in the castle, a Malachar woman ran across the hall toward the queen's room. She knocked slowly and gently on the door and said. "It's time for the ostendum."

