

chapter 1 revised

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 was fixing 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 head, the Malachar soldiers stood above 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 metres in front of him.

They arrived in front of the Vaelus pits, two lanterns were hung up on the doors. 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.

“Two 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 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. One thousand 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 knows 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 too 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."