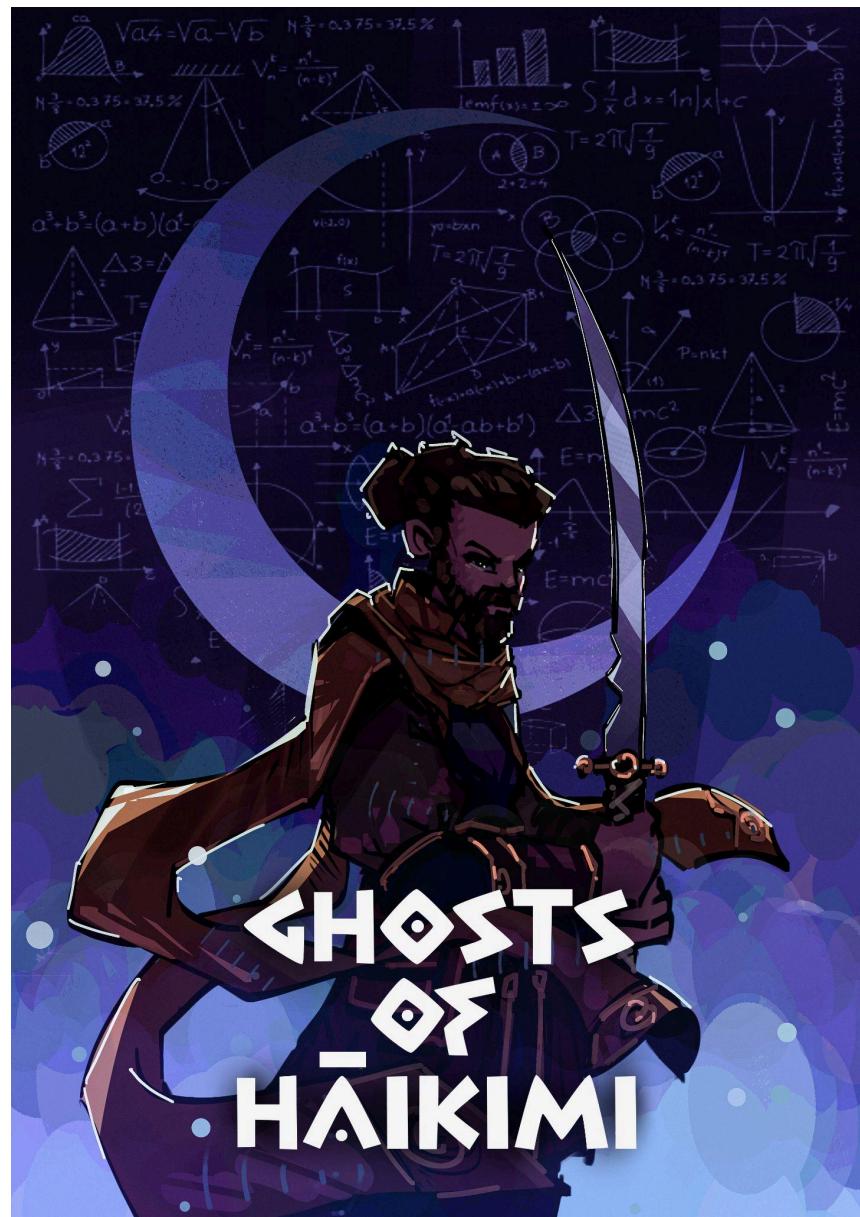


Ghosts of Hāikimi

F. P. Twyman



Act One

Each morning, the flowers wake and turn toward the sun.

So must we.

The Cycle of Kāmaar

"The moon breathes, and the world follows."

The peoples of Ilhara do not measure seasons by the tilt of distant stars but by the steady pulse of Kāmaar, the Silver Light, their Moon. As it waxes and wanes, it draws heat from the land and returns it again, dictating the rise and fall of temperature, the flow of rivers, and the coming of storms.

The Breath of the Moon

Phase	Moon Phase	Effect on the Land
Blazing Sun (<i>Shäl'Ash</i>)	Waxing Crescent	The Silver Light is weak, and the world burns. The air is thick, the rivers shrink, and the heat is unrelenting.
Veil of the Silver Light (<i>Nafas Layl</i>)	Waxing Half Moon	The Silver Light gathers strength, pulling heat from the land. Nights cool, and the winds begin to stir.
Breath of Night (<i>Akāi 'Kāmaar</i>)	Full Moon	Kāmaar reaches its peak, casting frost into the sand. The world exhales, and the land is at peace.
Waning Moon's Lament (<i>Nat-Kāmaar</i>)	Waning Half Moon	The Silver Light fades, and warmth returns. The sky darkens with storms, and the cycle begins again.

Chapter 1

Wind. Salt. Silence. It was almost enough to feel human again.

Hāikimi ko-Harkyla sat cross-legged at the western edge of Ilhara, staring out across the restless expanse of the Kora Sea. At the back of his mind was an itch, one he knew full well he had no hope of gauging. The sharp lines of his face, carved with the precision of something almost geometric yet basically accidental, caught the dim glow of Kāmaar as it spilled beneath his hood. His green eyes, luminous and unflinching, traced the tide with quiet intensity, searching for meaning in the mist curling over the water. Behind him stretched dust, silence, and everything uncertain. Before him, the sea he had known since childhood churned under the sway of Nat-Kāmaar. His hands were still calloused, still marked by war. Weeks had passed since he'd last faced a Fjarlündian blade, but they hadn't softened. They didn't feel like his anymore. He looked down at them in disgust, closed his eyes, cracked his knuckles.

He could not concentrate. His eyes opened before he told them to.

He remembered reading about the mu-Alwûd, how they said that after a warrior had served his country, returning home would grant him eternal peace. He looked down at his hands again:

I'm still waiting.

Hāikimi was used to waiting—just not like this. And, in truth, reflecting on a book he'd been forced to read wasn't helping. He had returned to a place he'd long buried beneath war. He was home, and yet somehow a stranger to it. The moon chilled his blood. As she had so often before, rivulets of her cool light coursed through his veins. But he couldn't be sure it was God. The waning half-moon hung high, half her face watching the hardened soldier below as she crept through his weary limbs, her other half hidden, as if ashamed of the storm she had loosed upon Ilhara. The waning moon loomed high above, not still, but rocking faintly. Even now, during Waning Moon's Lament, when the world balanced between frost and flame, Kora's waters were dangerously reflective. A mirror of the purple sky.

He tried to reach Ishaarn beneath the Silver Light. Above, the stars wandered their deviations, weaving restlessly through the lament of the moon. It was hard to imagine God didn't find the

futility of his attempts amusing, but he hadn't come to pray. Not really. He came to hide—from the screams the silence carried, from the pain Eliyä hadn't yet begun to feel. But he mouthed the words anyway. Habit. Hope. He didn't know which.

Please, Ishaarn, grant safe passage into this world for my children. He muttered in his mind, every syllable swallowed by the brewing storm.

“You’re going to have a twinned birth,” Mehrad, the healer in Daerween, had said, working a forest-green salve across her swollen abdomen. The ointment caught the light, shifting like leaves in water across the protrusion. His diagnosis had hardly been necessary, her belly gave the truth away.

“This is good luck, Master Hāikimi. Twinned stars under the Silver Light.”

At the time, Hāikimi had found the idea of good luck almost comical. But the humour had quickly soured into anxiety, into a weight deeper than calloused hands or wandering prayers.

“Perhaps this is a turning point for Ilhara,” Mehrad had offered in jest.

Perhaps.

The memory of Eliyä grounded him once more, the sand beneath him had never felt harder.

Let my wife survive what so many women do not. Do not let the Waning Moon of Nat-Kāmaar dictate my children’s stars.

He shut his eyes and drew a steady breath, settling into the rhythm of the Kora Sea. The prayer pulsed quietly beneath his ribs, something between breath and belief. His drezzar—a crescent blade of forged Kyn steel—stood planted in the sand beside him, half-buried, like the moon above. Retired, for now.

I fear Ilhara will never be truly safe for children of Threnna. The warrior thought.

He opened his eyes. The tide had paused, just for a breath, and in that rare silence, his mind drifted. Silence had always unsettled him. The Thrennan Front had taught him that quiet wasn’t peace. Quiet was the moment before something broke.

Through the mist, a handful of Kora ships emerged, their dark hulls gliding silently toward the Ilharan coast. Built from layers of varnished vashlar, their craftsmanship was undeniable. Towering above the water, their three-tiered oars fought relentlessly against the unpredictable tides of Nat-Kāmaar, each stroke defying the moon's temperamental pull defiantly. These were the fawris, the warships of Kora, their prows, iron rams of blackened Kyn gleamed ominously beneath the Silver Light, sharpened to splinter enemy hulls on impact. A single, towering oar at the stern of each vessel guided them through the moon's restless tides, an ancient design perfected through generations of seafaring.

Just what Ilhara needs. More ships, more men, Hāikimi thought as the boats loomed closer. *More blood.* He continued his attempted prayers. He had been to Kora many times, but he kept those memories folded deep, in the corners of himself he no longer dusted.

The emerging ships were more than vessels; they were the perfect embodiment of Thrennan engineering and Kora wealth—one could not exist without the other. Science and structure belonged to the Thrennan scholars of Southwest Ilhara, but only Kora's affluence could bring such designs to life. Affluence and influence.

Please, Ishaarn, grant my brothers—those with whom I have fought shoulder to shoulder—the mercy of not carrying the weight of grief and loss as I do. Let the winds of Nat-Kāmaar take our nightmares in their wake.

Hāikimi closed his eyes once more, surrendering to the tide of memory. He let the images of the destruction in the Kracked Lands drift past like clouds in a thunderstorm, as he had been taught by men of the cloth who had visited him the night before battle. *Imagine your nightmares as passing clouds,* they had said. *For like the great lunar cycle of Kāmaar, they too will pass, no matter how dark, no matter how destructive.* But the wisdom of the elders could not unsee what his eyes had seen. The battles of recent moons with Fjarlund, the mangled remnants of war, the weight of dying prayers whispered in the sand. And though the Silver Light dictated the rise and fall of all things, Hāikimi feared that some wounds, like the scars upon the land, could not be washed away by time alone. Another itch. But he could not think about them now. Perhaps this is why prayer would not come easy. For the first time it seemed futile.

He could not prevent his mind from wandering.

Prayer had been easier at war. He thought as the calluses on his palms cracked under hardened skin. *You simply ask the Lord for one more day, he either grants you it or gives your soul to the sand.*

The thought was so distracting it forced his eyes open without his will again. The fawris had begun anchoring on the beach. Kāmaar had granted them safe passage, welcoming them onto a shore battered by the unrelenting fury of the Kora Sea. Dawn crept over western Ilhara, the first threads of daylight painting the horizon in hues of deep amber and violet as the robed men of Kora descended onto the seafront, but the sun would not fully come. Not today, not during this moon. Their dark plum robes billowed in the wind, concealing their faces but not their intent. They moved with quiet precision, hundreds of them pouring from the great vessels, their silence heavier than the howling winds of Nat-Kāmaar. They carried sacks of supplies slung over their shoulders, but no words passed between them. Only the rhythm of their boots against the wet sand marked their arrival.

As the soldiers of Kora strode past, Hāikimi remained cross-legged upon the shore, his back straight as a newly crafted arrow. One by one, the men nodded to him in passing.

Men of Ishaarn, like me, he thought. I wonder if they carry the same weight of battle? The same exhaustion? The same ghosts perhaps. They will when they spend long enough in this land.

At the rear of the procession, a handful of men of the cloth walked in measured, deliberate steps, draped head to toe in the white robes of Ishaarn. They cradled the Alhaarif, the first holy text, against their chests as if it alone sustained them. Their faces were distant, their thoughts buried so deep in devotion that Hāikimi could not tell whether their eyes were open or closed. Unlike the soldiers, they too carried supplies—though their struggle was evident. Their shoulders sagged beneath the weight of their burdens, their steps unsteady against the sand.

What do men of the cloth need to carry to Ilhara? He wondered. *We need them only for their blessings, for the hope they weave into weary hearts.* But he knew better. He had seen too much, fought in too many battles to believe that religious zeal and war were disparate pursuits.

One among them a young acolyte faltered under the weight of his load. He hobbled along the coastline, his breath laboured as the wind of Nat-Kāmaar battered his left side. With each step, the shifting sand threatened his balance until, at last, he stumbled. His bag slipped from his grasp, spilling onto the shore. The procession did not slow. No hand reached for the fallen acolyte as a thousand pieces of parchment scattered like sand starlings whipped into the storm. He scrambled across the wet shore, grasping desperately, yet the wind was merciless, tearing the pages from his fingers and carrying them across the shore.

Hāikimi rose from where he sat, his forest-green robe shifting in the vicious wind, and bent to retrieve whatever parchments he could. A small gesture for a young boy of the cloth, whose flustered hands fought against the Waning Moon's Lament.

“Darahk Vel, soldier,” the acolyte muttered as he saw Hāikimi standing before him, his robe marking him as a son of Ishaarn. “The moon does not rest. We should have sailed during Akāi, but here we are. For Threnna.”

Hāikimi studied him—young, burdened, yet still filled with the fire of conviction. Face pockmarked.

“Darahk Vel,” he returned. “This is no time to sail. *But Ishaarn has guided you safely. Welcome to Ilhara.*”

Welcome indeed. If the sea is unforgiving, the land is worse. But he kept this to himself.

“Thank you.” The acolyte paused, his breath still unsteady. “I have never seen Ilhara before. Is it as beautiful as they say, soldier?”

I'm sure it was once. And I am no soldier.

“Yes,” Hāikimi lied. “Perhaps more so.”

For a moment, the boy’s eyes shone with something untouched by war, hope, wonder, the belief that he had stepped onto sacred land.

He bowed his head. “Thank you for your service, soldier. Please, take one.”

He pressed a parchment into Hāikimi's hand before hurrying after the other acolytes, his dark plum robe billowing as he rushed to rejoin the procession. Hāikimi watched him go, then turned the parchment over in his fingers. The ink had smudged, but the words remained, written in a hand both careful and certain.

He read:

People of Ilhara,

In these sacred days of rebuilding as we continue to fight Fjarlünd for our motherland, we must remain united—devoted to truth, vigilance, and our passage to Ishaarn. In many provinces, rumours persist. Old superstitions. Disruptive voices. Some speak of dreams they did not earn, visions they cannot prove. These whispers are not divine. They are distortions.

False light cast upon fragile minds. The minds of Threnna and Kora will not be contorted. Let it be known: there are those who carry ancient eyes, that claim to whisper echoes of tomorrow. While some may call them blessed, the faithful know this is not Ishaarn's way. Prophecy cannot be inherited. It must be earned through silence, sacrifice, and scripture. Should you encounter such individuals—those with the green affliction—do not judge, do not fear. Report. Let the Order discern what is true of the Zinheer. In vigilance and mercy, For the good of the land.

The letter, which was undoubtedly a warning, made about as much sense to him as the dissipating stars above, which kept a cadence and purpose that eluded men like him. Men of Kyn steel and flesh. Hāikimi scanned the words again, tracing the script with his dark, worn fingers. The Zinheer—custodians of the land —had served Threnna time and time again, their visions sparing lives and preserving what little remained of the fractured sand beneath his feet.

Why would Kora spread such a message?

The question pressed hard enough on his mind to tear him from prayer altogether. His blade might have dulled, but Threnna's war had not and its allies were making that clear enough. Prayer could not keep ships from landing, nor blood from spilling. He rose with a quiet breath and withdrew the crescent blade of Kyn from the sand. The weight was familiar, though he had hoped never to lift it again.

Ahead, Daerween waited, its edges already swallowed by the coming storm.

Chapter 2

The streets of the village where he'd grown up were empty. Canvas sheets hung over abandoned merchant stalls, flapping arrhythmically in the pull of Nat-Kāmaar's wind. Dust swept through the lanes like stray memory, catching on door frames, whispering against the stone. Daerween felt familiar, but not like home. Not anymore.

Hāikimi had returned to the south of Ilhara, to his wife's side, two moons past, but already he feared he would never feel settled again. This was the part no one prepared you for. Kāmaar — still in her infancy — battered Daerween with unrelenting force, a shrill wind that smelled of brine and old wood. Yet the north was still reeling from its own storm. Though a temporary armistice with Fjarlünd had granted Hāikimi passage south, the soldiers of Daerween remained stationed in the north, which could mean only one thing: the battle would resume, and more matter would be given to the dunes.

Maybe the next truce, they'll remember what to do with the living, he thought, cracking his neck to the side as he navigated the empty streets.

The dull tap of his retired drezzar against his hip was a gentle reminder, an awkward one. The wars with their blue-eyed foes might have paused, but the war was still in his blood. Daerween did nothing to temper the unease. Another dull tap joined the wind. His heartbeat. Always slow at dawn, it had begun to rise. The change was imperceptible to anyone but him. He had always preferred mornings. The air was cooler, cleaner. His mind wandered less; the sky hadn't yet taken hold of him, it hadn't clouded his thoughts the way dusk did. Since returning from war, he had chosen the mornings for prayer. The birthing medicines that carried Eliyā through the night left her quiet well into daylight, and that gave him time — brief, borrowed time — to try and soften the tortures his mind would surely bring before nightfall.

Before he knew it, he had already pushed open the door of the drinking house. This, too, had become part of his morning ritual since returning to Daerween. Prayer no longer stilled his mind, so he had turned to velien at the tavern. He drank it at dawn. *Always* at dawn. The wine dulled the darker edges of thought, blunted the visions that flickered at the rim of sleep. But its pungent odour dragged other memories to the surface. So he had taught himself to drink while holding his

breath. But the smell hit him as soon as he stepped inside. Thick and damp, it burned the top of his nostrils like stale blood, and his heart quickened again, just for a second. Behind him, the wind caught the door and slammed it shut.

He made his way to the wooden counter. The short, dark man behind it —who Hāikimi had learnt was the owner of the tavern—didn't need to ask. One look, and he poured a tall, thick glass of wine.

Moon-blood. Blood water. Il'Red.

Names for the Thrennan wine that had become a perfect allegory for their struggle for Ilhara. Bitter, but necessary. Hāikimi reached into his satchel and retrieved a small ceramic vial of honey. He poured it into the velien and stirred it with his index finger, sweetness to blunt the edge of moon-blood. He took a sip, letting the bitterness settle in his throat as he absorbed the solemnity of the room. He was almost alone. At the far end of the vashlar counter sat a cloaked figure with sagging shoulders. The man hadn't looked his way. Hāikimi might not have noticed him at all, if not for two things. First, he'd never seen another patron in this drinking house—not once, not since returning to Daerween. Not at this hour. And second: the heavy, deep purple tome resting on the counter before the man.

A Son of Okharyn. Hāikimi thought as he took another sip of his honied velien.

Hāikimi recognised the deep purple tome before he registered the man. No one else carried a burden like that. Its cover was stained with sweat and sand, its corners warped by countless moons of travel. He had not seen a Son in many cycles and their presence in Daerween could mean only one thing:

Many more have given their souls to the sand. The thought troubled him. *Soon their families will know.*

The velien did nothing to quiet the memory that came unbidden: his mother's trembling hands, her face greyed with worry each time footsteps approached their door. She had lived in constant fear that a Son of Okharyn would come bearing the worst news, that her husband had given his blood and soul to the sand. That knock did come. Ōkami ko-Harkyla had been slain and granted

passage to Ishaarn. Even now, Hāikimi couldn't say what had broken him more: the thought of his father's corpse rotting on the dunes, or the redness in his mother's eyes that never seemed to leave her. He looked over at the cloaked figure, who too was drinking a large glass of velien. He couldn't be sure if it was sweetened. Honey was a luxury not often afforded to dissidents. A Son of Okharyn was the only other kind of man he could imagine drawn to a drinking house at this hour. The weight of their punishment (and the weight of that tome) would drive anyone to wine, no matter how bitter.

Hāikimi made his way over to the figure and took the stool beside him. The Okharyn was too fatigued to lift his gaze, but Hāikimi could feel the weight of his worry.

"Darahk Vel," he began. "You've made it south already?" The bitterness of the velien still clung to his tongue.

"Some take pity on me. Give me water. Wine." The Son of Okharyn's voice rasped, frayed at the edges. Spittles of wine clung to his chin. "In Rhūbat they think even a descenter deserves another sip. Less so in Tharū."

"And do you?" Hāikimi asked. Then, seeing the man too tired to answer riddles, he clarified: "Deserve another sip?"

At this, the Okharyn turned slowly, revealing a face so ruined by heat and exhaustion that even the wine soured in Hāikimi's throat. He studied Hāikimi with something between suspicion and awe, as if no one had asked him a genuine question in many moons.

"It doesn't matter what I think," he said at last.

And he was right. In a world where thoughts were dangerous, descent was unforgivable. The Sons of Okharyn would suffer for the rest of their lives for defying the Thrennan Front. Their punishment was to walk Ilhara under every moon, to carry the great purple tome inked with the names of the dead, and deliver that grief door by door, village by village. That face—creased, burned, broken—was shaped by a thousand names. The Okharyn, cloaked in the ochre of the Thrennan dunes, stood as a reminder: those who defied the Front were as easily scattered as

sand. He bore the cost of war in every step, and Hāikimi ko-Harkyla found it hard not to pity him.

“Is it heavier?” Hāikimi asked, his voice low enough for only the two of them.

The Okharyn turned, eyes dropping to the curve of the blade at Hāikimi’s hip. To him, it was not a traveller speaking but the Front itself, and he recoiled as if the question were a threat.

“I’m sorry, soldier. But why ask me? I am sworn not to—”

“I am not a soldier. Not anymore.” The words tasted strange, as if they belonged to another mouth. He wasn’t sure he had spoken them aloud before. But this was true of both of both men: neither were soldiers anymore. “I only meant the tome. It must weigh heavy. Are there many new names?”

This relaxed the Okharyn, but not much.

“Many.” Was all he managed.

The Sons of Okharyn will be busy this moon.

“Zāhn sent more men to the Front. I am not surprised,” Hāikimi said.

At the name, the Okharyn flinched. Hāikimi caught the tremor in his ruined features.

I do not blame him. Zāhn ko-Tahr’s name chills me too. Still.

Hāikimi tried to soothe him. “Soldiers will always die. That is war.” The words fell flat. He realised then who he spoke to: not a fighter, but a man too fearful to raise a blade (or too principled to). From the Okharyn’s hunched shoulders, Hāikimi guessed it was the fear. “You are serving your time now. That is all that matters.”

The man turned his head, dread carved deep into his face. Hāikimi knew the look. He had worn it himself, for his own sins.

Not now, he told himself, as the old sins pressed into his ribs.

He slid his cup across. The Okharyn's own glass was already dry, drained to its last honied drop.

“It is not only soldiers in your ledger, is it?” Hāikimi asked. He tried to shape the words with compassion. But it was his own fear he heard in the question. But no answer came. Not from the Okharyn’s mouth, at least. His eyes gave him away, pupils widening, a brittle attempt at a tear that never fell. His body clung to every drop of moisture it had left. Hāikimi reached into his satchel and drew out the parchment the boy of the cloth had pressed on him during his broken meditation that morning. He slid it across the counter, watching to see if the Okharyn’s gaze could still take in the words. Hāikimi was sure the Okharyn could read the Lisain script. Few soldiers in Threnna could, but the Sons of Okharyn lived among names and ages set down in that ancient tongue, names families no longer dared to speak, ages too young to bear. And sometimes there was no body left to match them at all.

His heart quickened. He thought of his own unborn children.

The Okharyn drained the velien in one gulp, wincing at the bitter aftertaste. He held the empty glass a moment, staring into its hollowness.

“Yes,” he managed at last. His voice was thin, worn. The war with Fjarlünd had stripped him, and his grim duty as a Son of Okharyn had finished what the war began.

Hāikimi rapped the vashlar counter. The owner brought another glass. He stirred in a thread of honey, hoping sweetness might draw words from the man, or at least ease his hurt. Yet the gesture sickened him. He had walked away from the wars, but he still found himself digging for answers about Ilhara. He couldn’t help himself.

The Okharyn took a sip.

“Why?” Hāikimi began. “Why the Zinheer? Why would Tahr order these summons now?”

“I don’t know. My task is only to carry the news south of the dunes—that their daughters have been taken.” His voice was loose with fatigue but frayed at the edges, as if every word might break him. Each time he spoke, his head tilted, and Hāikimi caught the crackle of dryness in his eyes, as if he had stared too long into the sun.

In truth, we all have, Hāikimi thought, weighing his next words.

“Taken. Where?”

I already know the answer to this.

“From their homes. To the sand.” The Okharyn gagged on the words. He had read the names, traced their ages in the ledger. He snatched the tome from the counter and pushed to his feet. “I’ve said too much. Thank you for your kindness... for the drinks. I have duties to attend.”

I know full well what those duties are. I can hear the knocks already. Hāikimi thought as he watched the Okharyn in his ochre gown step into the storm, the purple tome dragging at his side, burdened by duty to the motherland.

Chapter 3

Hāikimi did not know how long he had lingered in the drinking house, only that his limbs were heavy. When he opened his eyes, darkness had settled over Daerween. Dusk spread its opaque veil across Ilhara, and Nat-Kāmaar still threatened a violent storm. The sky an off-mauve. Hāikimi's head throbbed with thirst, his mouth was dry with bitterness.

It is never the taste of honey that remains, he thought, rising to his feet and moving toward the door, his drezzar swaying. *Always the bitter aftertaste with blood water.*

He stepped back into the streets of Daerween. The moon stirred sand from the ochre ground and hurled it against the sandstone walls. Waning Moon's Lament was only beginning, yet already she made her presence felt.

Hāikimi narrowed his eyes against the sandy grit, a skill every warrior of the Thrennan Front had to master. However, few wore it as naturally as he did. They had called him Ash-Eyes, for the grey cast that haunted the gaze of his otherwise brown eyes. He never blinked when storms rose, nor when villages burned. Men learned to follow that stare. Others, with more reverence, named him Moon-Lidded, as if Kāmaar herself shaded his sight. A few even whispered the Unblinking. He clenched his fist, forcing the memories down. He was no soldier now. Those names served little purpose. He had blinked plenty in the drinking house, closed his eyes altogether, dulled by velien, his words with the Okharyn still thick on his tongue.

Ash-Soul. That is what they should call me now. The wind struck his cheeks as if to agree.

The streets lay as empty as they had at dawn. Hāikimi was alone, the only soul to face the storm. The people of Daerween had barred themselves inside, hiding from Nat-Kāmaar—as they were right to do. Hiding also because a Son of Okharyn walked among them.

I fear it will not be only sand beating at their doors tonight. He thought as he pressed further south.

Through the storm he caught a sound he knew: wooden wheels rasping over sandy cobbles. He had grown accustomed to it since the first day he left Daerween—the low clatter of vashlar carts, the soft grind of rims banded in iron, the patient knock of spokes. Southron minds had bent wood

into circle and made distance obey. Two curves, married, became a wheel; a truth as plain as sand and as precise as any law. When he thought of the wheels that bore men to war—or carried what remained of their bodies back again—he saw only two drezzar, mirrored into a circle like the sun. Yet the drezzar was meant to echo the moon. Neither sun nor moon showed themselves above as the caravan rattled past. Itch at the back of his skull travelled down his neck, like sand crawling his skin.

Every fighting man is already north. He thought as the vehicle moved by. *This is no war party.*

He was right. Cloaked figures huddled in the back, shoulders too slight for men of the blade, cloaks too dark for the cloth. As the front reached him, one figure lifted their gaze. Not the face of war. Not eyes like his, dulled to ash. But irises of shifting emerald. A face of youth. Youth and worry. Their eyes held only long enough for him to squint against the sand, and for her to notice the drezzar hanging awkward at his side. His chest lurched, whether from his own quickened heart or her stifled gasp, he could not tell. Then the moment was gone, carried off with Kāmaar. Fleeing Daerween. She saw him, his matter, and the velien still clung to his throat. The caravan rolled into dusk, its vashlar chassis beating the sandy earth. The parchment from the beach weighed on his satchel, still salted and damp with the sea as he walked on, nearly tripping over his own feet.

They have already begun their work. The thought pressed on him heavier still. The fawris landing in Ilhara. The Sons of Okharyn in the south. *The Zinheer are being forced out.*

The storm had not pierced Hāikimi's eyes, but it raged in his mind. The aftertaste of velien still pressed at him as he came to a sandstone building whose vashlar shutters rattled out of tune with the gale. Those shutters were usually painted a dark mauve, polished with an ancient Thrennan varnish the colour of sun-bleached honey, meant to catch the hope of Akāi'Kāmaar. Now they were freckled with wet sand.

Hāikimi entered with measured care.

The hallway lay silent. Eliyā was either resting or still asleep; he could not tell. Dusting sand from his boots, he lowered his hood to reveal his sharpened features. Mehrad, the healer,

appeared to greet him. His nervous energy jarred against the storm's pounding rhythm on the shutters.

"Master Hāikimi," he stammered. "Is Nat-Kāmaar growing heavy?—I needn't ask, it's plain enough. Forgive me, it isn't my place, but... your wife, Eliyā. She has been waiting for you." His stocky frame and grey-speckled beard trembled with the words. Mehrad didn't speak, words argued their way from his mouth.

"It is fine, Mehrad. I overslept," Hāikimi said, unclasping his cloak and hanging it on the wall. It felt like a lie, even if it wasn't. "How is she?"

"Quite alright," he began. "The twins trouble her, as you'd expect. The medicines help — the distilled moon-blood dulls it — but sleep only visits in fits. She... she did remark on your absence. Forgive me, Master Hāikimi, it isn't my place."

"Don't be sorry. Take me to her."

Mehrad opened his mouth as if to answer, then thought better of it. He gave a nervous nod and led Hāikimi down the hall. The healer left him at the door of Eliyā's chamber. She lay on her back, eyes closed, a damp cloth spread across her brow. Her black hair was pulled taut in a Thrennan plait, drawn from her face so the medicines could soothe her head. Two young healers tended her swollen belly, pressing cloths stained in shifting hues—dark greens, empty yellows, embarrassed ochres—from the ointments they worked into her skin. They were of fighting age, yet so slight of frame they looked as if a strong gust might topple them, even here within the storm-battered walls. Pages in a storm. As Hāikimi entered, the young healers gathered their vials and jars in haste, their hurried steps whispering down the hall. The sound roused Eliyā ko-Harkyla, though in truth she had heard him long before. Her weary eyes met his. Long, slanted, like drawn leaves.

"They say the babes are due soon." She reached for his hand, and he took it, squeezing gently. "I hope Mehrad speaks true. They feel angry with me."

For a moment he wasn't sure what she meant. Then he saw the kick ripple across her stomach.

You're better off in there, Hāikimi thought. The storm is not kind tonight.

“As angry as Kāmaar,” he murmured as the shutters clattered against the storm. Eliyā winced at the sound of his voice. The smell on his tongue.

“Have you been *meditating* again?” she asked, the words edged with a faint smile, though her breath came hard.

No matter how much honey I stir into my wine, it clings to my breath.

He did not answer.

“You’ve been gone a long while. Where were you?” Her words faltered, her eyes soft as petals, strained with pain.

“At the shore again. Fawris have come from Kora.” That much he allowed himself to say.

“What for?” Eliyā asked, lifting her head with effort.

“The usual.” He squeezed her hand as her chest rose and fell. “Bolstering the north, to meet the Fjarlündians on the Dun’Ha.” The words held enough truth, though not all of it. She needn’t carry the rest.

“Must you talk to me like a soldier, Hāikimi?”

The remark cut deeper than she knew. She had not meant to deny him what he once was. Yet the truth (that he was no longer a soldier) pressed against him, and he winced beneath it.

“I am sorry,” she said before he could reply. “You have only been back a moon, my love. The war will not leave you just yet.”

I fear it never will.

“But you earned your place in Daerween. With us.” She looked down, and the twins answered with a kick.

Earned... if that is the word. Memories splintered through his mind when he blinked. He spoke quickly, to outrun them:

“You’re right. The velien dulls the pain.” The words sounded hollow even as he said them. He looked at his wife, who needed medicine and distilled moon-blood merely to sleep. To breathe. She knew the truth of dulling pain.

She nodded, though worry lingered in her tired gaze. Hāikimi caught it even through his ashen-eyes.

“Will you read to me?” Her voice was fading. “Mehrad has had one of his boys sit and read, to help me sleep.” The medicine was already pulling her under, softening her edges. “They’ve been reading of the Nāya Aī — a transcription brought down from the mountains of El-Shawaar.”

Hāikimi reached for the book by Eliyā’s bed. It was a small thing, dwarfed by the purple tome the Son of Okharyn had laboured to carry. Eliyā’s eyes were already yielding to sleep, but as a former man of battle he honoured his duty now as husband.

He began to read:

*“Some saw only sun in its rim, but the moon placed her hollow within it.
The wells of sight drank deep — and one among them did not close.
She endured what should have broken, bearing visions as circles bear weight.
To look away was to be spared. To look within was to be chosen.
She who cannot die will remain — not to stop the story, but to keep it whole.”*

Reading had never come easy to him. When he paused for breath he heard the faint pattern of sleep in Eliyā’s breathing. Her stomach stilled; her ribcage rose and fell in gentle rhythm, a cradle for the babes. He closed the book as though it were the purple tome the Sons of Okharyn had borne to their deaths across Ilhara’s deserts, yet he did not release her hand. His thoughts turned not to the Nāya Aī, but to another Zinheer: the girl with emerald eyes who had looked through him only hours before, and the acolytes of Kora, their Kyn blades and religious zeal, already hunting her kind.

He held Eliyā’s limp hand in his weathered palm until no light bled through the shutters. Gently, he folded her arm across her chest. Her breathing hitched, as if some part of her sleep recognised the touch, then settled again. The babes were quiet too. Or so Hāikimi chose to believe. He left

the chamber and walked the hushed hallways of the infirmary. A breath of wind curled at his ankles, slipped in from the storm outside, as if to remind him what waited beyond the door. In the hallway, a flicker caught his eye. A small, piercing flame, dancing a frantic rhythm as if guided by the moon. He moved closer. It showed itself only through a narrow gap in the door, small enough for a sandmouse to slip through.

The candle burned with a purple wick, its flame tinted maroon. Hāikimi remembered using such lights to plot night raids. Eternal flame. But here it revealed something gentler: three of Mehrad's assistants, their gazes lost in books, their small frames perfectly upright. He could not see the words, only the quiet devotion with which they read. He dared not interrupt. One of the boys looked up. His eyes curved like crescents, his dark features slashed by a horrific purple scar. *They must have heard me*, Hāikimi thought. *Or smelt my breath*. The boy snapped his book shut with Hāikimi's first blink, and with the second he blew out the flame, retiring their learning to the dark.

He returned to his own chamber, where another candle waited. This one had no purple wick, it was meant to burn out. Mehrad had left it for him, as he did each night. The healer knew sleep came hard to Hāikimi, but ritual did not, and so he prepared the room with quiet care. Easing a soldier back into everyday life in the south. Hāikimi unbuckled his belt and shrugged off his cloak. He leaned his drezzar against the wall, the gesture as practiced as breathing. He lay back on the cot and tried to close his eyes. But weariness would not come; he had squandered it in the drinking house. Too much had passed in a single day. He let the candlelight guide him, each frail flicker coaxing him toward rest. But sleep evaded him, the shutters rattling their defiance. The flame dulled, fighting to stay alive and then a new rhythm carried it.

Knocking. A fist on wood. Each thud seemed to stir the flame back upright. Even the shutters hushed between blows, as if the storm itself wished him to listen.

The Sons of Okharyn have started their duties. He whispered to himself.

That was what the Okharyn in the drinking house had called it: *his duties*. The word felt crude, cruel. Each knock was followed by a pause, heavy as breath. The people of Daerween knew what such summons meant, at such an hour, beneath the first breath of Nat-Kāmaar. Then came a

second silence, the hollow pause of people absorbing the news: another son of Threnna lost to the Fjarlündians, surrendered to the sand. Each knock thudded in Hāikimi's ribcage, a pang of guilt with every strike. For coming home, for leaving the wars behind. The flame was dying, and so were the sons of Threnna, of Kora, of Daerween.

At last it ceased. Candlewax hissed as it fell, leaving a dry, acrid wisp in its wake. The knocking stopped too.

He lay in darkness, waiting for the more horrific sound to follow.

And it came. The storm carried the echoes, but this time it was screams that broke through his chamber. High, piercing—the voices of Daerween's women, for every man of fighting age was gone to the north.

But not Hāikimi. For that he felt guilt.

He lay still, the cries twisting in the wind, keeping sleep at bay. The candle had died, yet the room glowed with faces he had seen: the Zinheer girl, the frail boy marked by a purple scar, the men he had watched fall to the blue-eyes. And those he had not: his children.

Chapter 4

He was awake before the sun. If it had risen at all, it was swallowed by moon and cloud. Hāikimi did not know if he had truly slept at all. The screams had carried through the night. He thought of his mother again, her eyes raw, her spirit thinned by years of waiting. In Ilhara, war spared no one: men gave their blood to Ishaarn, but it was their wives and daughters who bore the weight of the news. He had never been one for sleep. His mother's long nights waiting for news of Ōkami had taught him that. Her grief was a sickness that spread; she never knew how much of it he caught through the cracks of half-closed doors, watching her rub her eyes raw, her nails raking at her skin. He clenched his fists, willing the memory away. Those sleepless nights had followed him and never left.

Rising from the cot, he gathered his few possessions. The door where he had glimpsed the boys reading was shut. If they still studied by candlelight, he would not know. Eliyā was asleep. Her breath came heavy, but steady, the slow rise and fall of her chest a rhythm he envied. He leaned over her, kissed her brow. The dampness on her skin met his cracked lips, sharp with salt.

After pulling on his boots—cleaned and set by the door by Mehrad, ever mindful of his routine—Hāikimi stepped back into the storm while the house still slept. The fingers of his sword-hand twitched, as they often did in the mornings since he'd left the north, a faint echo of battles past. He made his way toward the shore. Behind the infirmary a dune rose steep and sharp; he climbed it in a zig-zag, easing the strain on his legs. From the crest he looked down at the coastline. No new fawris on the horizon. Or else they had already broken against the sea. Kāmaar would grant him no meditation today. The waters below promised only to swallow him whole. Though his ritual was broken, he felt a quiet relief, prayer had slipped from his grasp, more burden than solace.

Hāikimi turned back into the village. The streets lay as barren as the night before. Daerween seemed drained, not by the storm, but by the news the Front had delivered in the weary frame of a Son of Okharyn. The village had known both before. His steps carried him to the corner where the drinking house crouched. A warped vashlar sign swung on rusted hinges, its letters long since lost to sand and weather. He had never asked its name, nor cared to learn it.

Some things are best left unknown. He was right. Better for it to remain a stranger, no matter how much velien he let into his veins. That was how he wanted it.

His sword hand twitched again. He pushed at the door. The wood resisted. A lock.

Impossible. Since his return to Daerween he had never known the place to shut, not for night, not for storm, not for grief. Always it welcomed drifters. Until now. The sign swayed, rust flaking to sand and sprinkling onto his boot. Then another sound cut through, harsher, more agitated, as though it too resented the house's closure. At first he could not place it. He stood still, waiting for the storm to ease enough for a single blink, lowering his hood to catch the sound more clearly.

The back of the house. Hāikimi told himself as he turned toward the wretched creak and moved to meet it.

At first sight of the body, his hand flew toward the drezzar at his hip. It froze there. No need. This foe was already defeated. The man dangled lifeless from an ancient tree behind the drinking house, his body swaying gently in the moon's pull, mocking the vacant tavern. The rope had bitten deep into his throat, skin split where it carved away his breath. Blood crusted at the corners of his eyes; spittle clung to his chin still. His ochre gown, caked in wet sand, reeked of urine and bitter velien unsweetened by honey.

The purple tome was gone.

Hāikimi stood still, watching the Son of Okharyn drift in the storm's rhythm. Every man had a point at which he broke during war. *This one had reached his.* Hāikimi could not tear his gaze away. *So did I,* he thought. That was the point of the Sons: to suffer penance in endless duty, to carry grief door to door until grief consumed you in turn. He was embarrassed at the guilt that gnawed at him.

"I have said too much." The Okharyn's final words pressed like stone on Hāikimi's chest.

Not enough, he thought, as last night's screams clawed back into his mind, burdens heavier than any tome. The Okharyn had carried them too. He had seen their faces. Threnna had broken him. Whatever his crime, it was paid in full.

That's more than I can say for myself.

At the foot of the rear steps, a bottle of velien rested against the wood. Beside it, a small vial of honey. They looked abandoned, but not discarded. Left with purpose. An offering. A mercy. Whether meant for him or for the dead man in front of him, Hāikimi could not tell. He stooped, weighing the bottle in his hand. Its clay was damp and cool from the storm, the cork still clinging tight. The vial of honey was only half-full, its golden threads thick and sluggish in the dim light. He uncorked the bottle and tipped the honey in, far more than he usually allowed himself. Sweetness to drown bitterness. Sweetness to blunt the sight of a ruined neck.

He settled on the step, cloak heavy with rain, and raised the bottle to his lips. The velien struck hard—metallic, bitter, unrelenting—but the honey softened it just enough to pass his coarse throat. He drank slowly at first, eyes fixed on the body that swayed above. The Son of Okharyn rocked in rhythm with the storm, each movement a pendulum marking the passage of grief. A grief only offered by the elements. His ochre gown clung to him, wet with sand and a purple stain that Hāikimi could only imagine was a mixture of wine and blood. His head lolled sideways, blood dried at his eyes, spittle crusted at his chin. The storm tugged him this way and that, but nothing could wake him.

Hāikimi drank again. Each swallow spread heat through his chest, pushing against the cold of the storm. The honey clung stubbornly to the velien's sharpness, never conquering it. Just as no sweetness had ever conquered war. The screams from the night before came back to him. The women of Daerween wailing as the Sons delivered their message. Now, with the velien coating his tongue, the cries seemed to fade. Blurred into the sound of rope creaking, wood groaning, wind howling.

This was his ritual. And even here, with a dead man hanging before him, it was not broken. He poured more honey, desperate to thicken the sweetness, to drown the taste, to quiet the weight in his chest. He drank until his thoughts blurred, until the rope swayed out of rhythm, until storm and screams became a single dull thrum.

At last his body slackened. His eyelids closed without his permission. And he drifted into sleep at the foot of the steps, while above him the nameless Okharyn kept swaying, his vigil uninterrupted.

*

He thought he heard more knocking as he drifted in and out of Ilhara's presence. At first it was distant, like the duties of the Okharyn continuing through the storm. But the sound softened. A tap. Then another. On his shoulder. He stirred, the half-empty bottle of velien slipping from his grasp and rolling into the sand. His eyes cracked open. A face hovered above him. Young, but already ruined. A scar, sharp and cruel, cut across the boy's features in a perfect stroke of amaranth. The same boy he had glimpsed in the infirmary's candlelight.

"Master Hāikimi," the boy stammered, his voice thin, as if each word had to fight its way out. Panic gleamed in his eyes, wide and crescent-shaped, as if he had no wish to be seen again. And yet here he was.

Hāikimi blinked, still climbing from sleep, trying to place the boy's awkward, trembling frame against the storm around them and the slack body that hung from the tree.

"Mehrad, the healer," the boy blurted at last, as if he hadn't spoken in days. "He sent me. For you." His throat bobbed nervously, scar stretching with the motion.

And he knew I'd be here.

Hāikimi sat straighter, dread pushing away the fog of velien.

"Your wife," the boy said, the words breaking apart. "She has spilled water. The babes are coming."

Hāikimi rose too fast. His head throbbed in protest.

Something in the boy's face unsettled him. The fragility of his frame, untouched by the swaying corpse nearby. Hāikimi was fogged by velien, unsteady.

He followed as the boy darted through Daerween's empty streets, leaving behind the Okharyn and the half-drunk bottle of honied wine. Every few steps the boy glanced back, checking Hāikimi kept pace, though his eyes never met his. He avoided his gaze as he had in the candlelit chamber the night before — but here, there was no flame to snuff out. They pressed on until they reached the infirmary. The door flew open at their approach, shutters rattling in the wind.

The storm outside was nothing compared to the one within.

Mehrad met Hāikimi as the door slammed shut behind them. He snatched at Hāikimi's cloak and belt with frantic efficiency, sweating and twitching. Yet his hands never faltered; each movement was intentional, practised; the composure of a healer whose nerves always outran his craft.

Eliyā sprawled across a wooden bench, crying out to Ishaarn for salvation. The room was thick with sweat and stress, the air charged with the Silver Light above, as if lightning itself pressed on their lungs. She writhed against the bench, shrieks breaking raw from her throat, her body shifting with pain she could not master. Her swollen stomach rippled in waves, the twins inside striking like fists against the storm. Time had come. Waning Moon's Lament raged not only outside, but within her.

Please, let the moon be kind to her.

“Master Hāikimi, we believe we must deliver now. Nat-Kāmaar is playing havoc within her, and the moon does not lie,” Mehrad said anxiously. But Hāikimi’s eyes remained fixed on Eliyā, who looked at once possessed and utterly fatigued. Hāikimi gripped her hand tightly, his fingers wrapped around hers. In a rare moment between cries, she looked at him and winced.

She can smell the wine on me again. He was right, but she was in too much pain to name her disappointment.

“Read to me,” she panted. It was not a plea but a command.

He reached for the Alhaarif by the cot, the heavy book of Ishaarn. His voice came out steady, soldierly, not priestly:

“From the first drop of life, the seed took hold, clinging to the sacred design of Ishaarn. The flesh formed as the bones wove their lattice—”

“Not that one!” she gasped, her head jerking toward him. She tried to move her hand, slick with sweat, toward the smaller book he had used the night before.

He obeyed. He opened the transcription of the Nāya Aī. Her palm clutched his, fevered and unrelenting, her nails digging crescents into his skin as he read:

“‘What did you see?’ they asked her. It is what they would ask her kind in ages to come.”

Her grip tightened further, eyes searching his. The pain contorted her features, but it was not only pain. Something rawer lay beneath, unspoken but vivid: fear.

“I can’t breathe,” Eliyā gasped, her stomach writhing in agony as the boy with the amaranth scar worked salves across her belly, slipping quickly between her legs.

Her voice strained, breaking, yet quiet, pulled at something in him he had spent years hardening.

“But first it was her,” he read, voice low existing in the chaos. “She was the first epoch, with eyes that did not question but guided. She was sweet — but infinite. She is tomorrow as the moon is today.”

But he did not let it show. He couldn’t. Hāikimi only squeezed her hand tighter, his calloused fingers pressing hers, holding her to the words as though they might carry her through:

“For they did not speak of her in the present. For she existed, exists, and transcends every fractal of matter.”

Mehrad hurried in, wiping the sweat from Eliyā’s brow with a cloth soaked in mauve liquid. His hands were sure, though his shoulders twitched with nervous energy. His voice was grave, urgent.

“The Waning Moon’s Lament is upon her,” he said. “We must move quickly.”

Hāikimi nodded, his jaw tightening. Here, his sword was useless. His past, meaningless. He closed the book, the words falling away like ash.

“You must push now, my love.” His voice was steady, but his chest was burning. His head still foggy.

He leaned close, searching for her eyes. They flickered, glassy, refusing to hold his, as if pain itself had unmoored her gaze. Her body arched, wracked with a force beyond her will. Eliyä screamed, the sound raw enough to drown even the shutters’ rattling. Hāikimi pressed his forehead against hers, his hand locked around her own, his knuckles white from the strain.

“Again,” Hāikimi urged, his voice sharp, almost certain. The boy with the scar worked feverishly at Eliyä’s side, wiping blood and sweat with trembling fingers.

Eliyä’s chest heaved, her cries spilling like broken glass. She bore down, every tendon in her neck straining, her face contorted in pain that seemed too much for one body to hold. Her nails dug into Hāikimi’s hard skin, and he welcomed it, let it anchor him as her strength bled through his hand.

Then, in a shuddering moment between storm gusts, the air split with a cry not her own. Thin, piercing, defiant. The sound of life forcing its way into a broken Ilhara.

The boy was lifted into the air, slick with blood and fluid, his lungs already raging against the storm outside. Mehrad’s usually restless hands held him steady now, his nervous energy stilled by the weight of the moment.

“A son,” the healer declared, his stuttering voice cracking against the gale.

But the second child...

Something was wrong.

“The twin star will not move,” Mehrad urged, voice trembling but hands steady on Eliyä’s convulsing belly.

Her body twisted violently, screams raw enough to split the walls. The swell of her stomach writhed like roots clawing upward through dry earth, desperate for air. Outside, the storm roared; inside, the air thickened, charged with Nat-Kāmaar's unseen hand, dictating life and death, indifferent to the agony it wrought.

"We must take it out." Mehrad's hand shook as he pressed a hunting drezzar into the scarred boy's palm. Hāikimi's heart surged and did not settle. He did not protest. He knew the blade had its place, even here.

The boy dipped the weapon into a hissing violet fluid, its edge seared to a plum glow. Mehrad thrust a cinder block bound in wolf-hide toward Hāikimi.

"She must bite, Master Hāikimi. The pain will..." His words fractured, but he did not stop. "We must move."

By *we*, he meant *he*.

The boy drew a line down Eliyā's belly with a slick of purple serum. She had no strength to look, nor need. Her jaw clamped down on the block before Hāikimi even placed it, teeth grinding as the drezzar descended. The scarred boy's frail shoulders steadied into uncanny precision. His nerves left him; only his scar remained, as if guiding his hand. He carved her open as though unveiling another world. Blood welled, hot and unyielding, spilling into the storm's rhythm. Eliyā's eyes rolled back; the block slipped from her mouth, clattering to the floor. She spat a spray of blood and foam into the air and then the scream broke loose.

A second cry.

A girl. Barely formed, yet ferocious. Her wail split the chamber, rattled the shutters, and thrust the storm back upon itself.

Eliyā's chest stilled.

Chapter 5

“For the world is not stagnant, nor is its truth sealed. Every step taken, every horizon crossed, unveils what was once unknown. And just as the land reveals itself to those who seek, so too shall the hidden realms beyond the veil, for Ishaarn does not conceal knowledge from the ones who walk in wonder.” **The Discovery, The Alhaarif**

Two days had passed. Eliyä lay on her cot, drifting in and out of fevered sleep, her stomach bound with a crude lattice of Thrennan flax. The boy with the purple scar had stitched her back together, needle trembling, shoulders rigid, yet every line of thread precise as scripture. It had taken many bloody hours. Hāikimi had watched them all, powerless, his hands twitching at his side as though they could hold her together better than thread. The babes lay in a cot at their side. Eyes grey, nameless. They would remain so until the Silver Light revealed their colour. For now, Nat-Kāmaar had swallowed their cries.

It was dawn, and he had a new ritual. While Eliyä’s breathing rose and fell, faintly echoing against the stone walls, he crept to the dark wooden cabinet at the foot of her bed. He moved quietly, careful not to stir wife or children. Inside, a tall glass vial caught the dim light.

Il'Red.

He rolled the vessel in his palm, watching the thick liquid drag slowly against the glass. Velien, stripped of all distillation, left to dry beneath the suns until its numbing bite grew sharp as iron. It was meant for patients who had been cut open, stitched back together, left screaming on tables. Even the sight of the vial made his body revolt. His stomach clenched; his hands twitched. But the drinking house was closed, and he could not leave Eliyä’s side. He pulled the cork and raised it with his fighting hand, the fingers spasming faintly. A measured sip. The liquid clung to his salty tongue before sliding down his throat.

At once, his body turned on him. His throat convulsed, bile rising fast. The redness pooled hot in his gut before surging back. He retched in silence, moon-blood dribbling down his chin, spattering the sandy floor.

The same as yesterday, then. He thought grimly, stooping to wipe the mess. But the dried red stains on the sand only pulled him back to what he was trying, futilely, to drown.

He returned to Eliyä's side, the acrid aftertaste of moon-blood still clinging to his tongue, a bitter illusion of the nameless drinking house. *That will have to do*, he thought, lowering himself beside her as the world crept back into rhythm. Mehrad's helpers slipped into the chamber, their eyes darting away from Hāikimi's as they always did. He had never heard them speak, save for that night in the courtyard, before the Okharyn's swaying corpse. The scarred boy drew back Eliyä's gown, exposing the raw line of her wound. Grim, but necessary. Like the velien. He worked a silver paste into the seam, steady hands tracing over flesh that still remembered agony. Eliyä stirred, a soft cry escaping her lips, her face tightening even in sleep.

Beside him, the other boy sat in silence, weaving her black hair into a careful plait. His fingers moved with a healer's precision, binding her back together in gentler ways. Mehrad's visits had grown less frequent. With Waning Moon's Lament passing, the healer spent his days out in the village, returning only when burdened with supplies.

Sunlight strained at the shutters, pale threads of gold bleeding into the chamber as Hāikimi sat vigil, watching the boys tend to Eliyä. Their movements were quiet, practiced, the rhythm of her recovery as fragile as the light fighting its way through the storm. Daerween was stirring. In the wake of Nat-Kāmaar, the moon shifted, clouds thinning, the sun almost visible at dawn. Merchants' voices broke the silence, bartering as fish and salt laced the air. The sound of life—familiar, steady—though muted now, solemn. The Sons of Okharyn had ensured that. It was not their fault. But it was the doing of their words. After the boys had finished their work on Eliyä, they turned to the babes. They smeared a coarse purple balm across their upper lips to ease their breathing, then pressed water to their mouths with careful hands.

“Do you think their colour will come soon?” Hāikimi asked, his voice low, almost as if speaking to himself.

The boys did not answer. None could. They only shrugged, hesitant, their eyes sliding away from his. Weary. They left the room.

Hāikimi circled to the cot where the babes lay. They were quiet now, as they always were in the day, saving their screams for the night. *They must take after me*, he thought, a brittle jibe to himself. Hoping the sleepless curse his mother had pressed into him had ended with him. Their eyes were shut, but even through their lids he saw it, that pallid grey, waiting beneath, waiting to wake. Their eyelids seemed to tremble, a ripple across some half remembered lake, as if they possessed their own faint heartbeat, a private conversation with the tiny aorta beneath. Yet the lids remained sealed under the will of the moon. The sight chilled him.

“It can’t be true can it?” He recognised the laboured voice as if it were his own, it was that familiar.

He turned to find Eliyä awake, just. Her gaze fixed on him as he watched the babes. She must have seen the confusion in his face. The sharp tang of moon-blood still clung to the air, perhaps it had roused her.

“In the book,” she began, her voice breaking into a cough, the pain tugging at her healing stomach. Hāikimi leaned close, clasping her hand. She refused the comfort, pushing through, stubborn.

“The mountain people,” she rasped, another cough shuddering through her. “The boys of Eridāh... they transcribed the wall drawings of the Nāya Aï. For us?”

There’s no way I could know, he thought, caught again by her unfaltering memory. He had been reading the same passages to her before sleep; now, softened by medicine, they had sunk roots into her dreams.

“I don’t know,” he admitted at last. “But I do know you need rest.”

Her clouded eyes lingered on his. Drawn to the grey exhaustion he couldn’t hide.

“So do you,” she countered, her voice hoarse but steady. “All I do is rest. All *you* do is worry.” A cough seized her, breaking the rhythm, followed by a sharp wince. She caught her breath, then added, softer but no less sharp: “And drink.”

Her words settled between them. Yet her question about the Nāya Aī, about the boys who had once written what should never be forgotten lingered louder still.

“I will find out for you one day,” Hāikimi said, squeezing her hand, firm enough to make the promise almost real. “About the Nāya. The mountain folk.”

She squeezed back, though her wry look betrayed doubt.

“How are they?” she asked instead, her eyes flicking to the cot. He rose to lift them, but her hand caught his wrist. “Let them sleep.”

“They are well,” he said softly. “Still greyed.” He paused, voice quieter. “Do they wake you in the night?”

“The boy doesn’t,” she wheezed. “The girl does. I feel like she’s trying to tell me something.” A cough bent her in two; she steadied herself with a wince. “And sometimes—I can’t tell if I’m dreaming—I hear other screams. Not theirs. Other voices.” Her eyes flicked toward the shutter, wide with worry. “Do you hear them too?”

He felt the weight of the knocks, the grief the Okharyn had carried door to door before taking his own life. But he shook his head.

“No,” he lied. “The medicine tricks your sleep. Nothing more, my love.”

Her gaze lingered on him, doubt shadowing her face, but she said nothing.

It was then that Mehrad entered, the stocky healer shifting awkwardly into the chamber. Eliyā did not look up. Hāikimi did.

“Darahk Vel, Master Hāikimi,” Mehrad began, wringing his hands. “I trust you’ve caught up on your sleep... forgive me, of course you have, I only meant—well, I trust you slept well.”

He knows I didn’t. He wouldn’t leave a sleeping candle at my cot each night if he truly believed I did.

But the healer pressed on, determined to fill the silence. “I brought fresh fish from the market, for you, Eliyä.”

She tried to raise her head, but the tendons in her neck protested.

“Oh, no, no—don’t move,” Mehrad flustered, stepping closer. “You’ll tire yourself. I am most sorry.”

Mehrad moved to her side. He unwrapped a cloth that carried the sharp tang of the sea. The fabric had once been ochre, but now it was sodden through with fish guts and brine.

“I must apologise for the smell,” he said quickly.

You needn’t. Hāikimi thought. He welcomed it. The fish stench cut through the bitter reek of moon-blood he had spilled on the floor just before.

“These fish come from the Kora Sea,” Mehrad went on, his words tumbling faster than his breath. “Rich in protein. And the salt—ah, the ancient salts cleanse, draw out sickness. Sorry, I ramble, forgive me—too much detail. You must eat.”

Eliyä grimaced at the thought. The inside of her cheeks were torn raw from wood and flesh to muffle her screams. The idea of salt in those wounds made her wince. Mehrad broke the fish down with the back of a wooden spoon, grinding it in a vashlar bowl until it was caught between paste and pulp. He mixed in a measure of distilled velien and stirred, the concoction thick and rank. Noticing the vial of moon-blood emptier than before, his eyes flicked to Hāikimi. The gaze didn’t last long.

He spooned the mixture carefully to Eliyä’s lips. Each mouthful dragged a retch from her throat—just as violent as Hāikimi’s had been when he’d tried to drown his own pain.

I chose to drink mine. She has no choice.

And again, the guilt settled.

After her final mouthful, Eliyä's head sagged, the muscles in her neck loosening at last. Mehrad guided a vial of water to her lips; she swallowed, and he quickly dabbed the corners of her mouth with a dry cloth.

“When can I hold them?” she asked, voice faint.

“I cannot quite say,” he muttered, tucking the cloth into his satchel. “It is not yet safe. Your scar is... well, it is large, and the stitches risk tearing.”

It runs deeper than this. Superstition. Hāikimi's hand twitched as he forced himself back to the room.

“The babes were born during Nat-Kāmaar, miss Eliyä. So—well—we cannot be too cautious.” Mehrad's words stumbled, hurried, as though he wished himself elsewhere.

Even men of science cling to omens, it seems.

“The people of Ki and Eridāh, even Shu'neek, believe it ill luck for the mother to see the babes before the grey leaves their eyes.” He paused, then added quickly, “Of course, there is no knowing—but yes, caution is best. The babes are well. Just well.”

Eliyä's head drooped once more, as if she had drawn the healer into tales of the mountain folk only to lull herself toward sleep. Her new remedy.

The Il'Red seeped into her veins, the salt from the fish stung every wound. The usual pattern of breathing slowed, the fishy aroma lingered as Eliyä drifted.

“The mountain people. They wrote it all down. So the Nāya wouldn't be forgotten...” Was all she said as she slipped from Ilhara.

Mehrad laid a fresh cloth on her brow. Nat-Kāmaar was passing; the heat climbed one atom at a time. Her chest rose, the babes followed, all three breathing in rhythm. When he was certain they slept, the healer leaned toward Hāikimi. An anxious whisper:

“It seems miss Eliyä is enjoying the book,” Mehrad said, watching as the fishy potion pulled her deeper into stupor as her whispers ricocheted off the walls.

“What is it called?” Hāikimi asked.

“Yes, quite... quite interesting,” Mehrad fumbled, wringing his hands. “The elders of El-Shawaar did not often name their—how do I say—works. But the mountain folk of later years called it the Qīl-Uyūn.” He tripped on the syllables, flustered at Hāikimi’s rare engagement. “I don’t know how it ended up here, but it seems to have taken miss Eliyā...”

“And in Lisain? The common tongue?” Hāikimi pressed.

“Oh—yes, forgive me. The First Eyes.”

Mehrad risked meeting his gaze, just once, before turning to leave. At the threshold, he hesitated, one more thought fighting its way out:

“Master Hāikimi, I don’t quite know how to say this, but...” He bit his lip, sweat already cutting a line through his wrinkled brow. “Forgive me if I overstep.”

“Mehrad,” Hāikimi said, steady. “Speak.”

The directive helped. Slightly. “The distilled moon-blood. The healing velien.” He winced. “This is not an accusation. Only a caution.” His eyes flinched away, then back. “It is not meant for the pure of body. It numbs. It poisons. We give it only to those in pain.”

Hāikimi weighed the words. “The drinking house is closed. It steadies me since my return to Daerween.”

Mehrad vanished briefly into the hall and came back clutching a broad glass bottle, dark red and heavy in his hands.

“Of course, Master Hāikimi. I meant no insult.” He set it down, twitching fingers smoothing his beard. “But many soldiers return with ailments... thoughts.” His eyes dropped to Hāikimi’s hand, the faint spasm still there. “The velien can ease—but it corrodes. Better to drink the wine Threnna has treated than the medicine we keep for treating.”

Hāikimi accepted the bottle, lowering himself onto the aphorism, the carved motif pressing into his palm.

“Thank you, Mehrad.”

The weight dragged his mind back: to the tavern, to the Okharyn he had slid a drink toward, pity shaping his hand. *If this is my good fortune returned. Let mine not end in me hanging from a tree.*

*

Hāikimi read The First Eyes to Eliyä as dusk pressed against the shutters, the storm finally passing. He took slow, measured sips from the velien Mehrad had given him, feeling the moon-blood coil through his veins. Letters blurred, patience thinned, but Eliyä slept easier to the sound of his voice. His hand twitched as he turned each page, though the tremor dulled as the wine sank deeper. The mountain folk of El-Shawaar were strangers to him. He knew they bent knee to Ishaarn as Threnna did, that their eyes carried the same green and the same brown as his people, but their lives were written in different ink. The Qīl-Uyūn spoke of them not just as warriors, but as quiet custodians of vision, distant from the blood-feuds with Fjarlünd and the scalps of the blue-eyes.

Seems an easier life, he thought as he struggled to read the words before him aloud, forcing the stiff page over, the script already slipping from his drink-numbed tongue. He read to Eliyä of the akäree. A violet salve drawn from the flora of El-Shawaar, once used by the ancients of Threnna to heighten the senses. They took it before transcribing the Book of the First Eyes, each line drawn in a state of perfect clarity, painting the irises violet. No curve was left untraced, no symbol untouched. Highly addictive, it hollowed the body in her absence, like a god who touched you once, then left.

Like the moon-blood, he thought, imagining it burning through his blood as if it still belonged to him.

He reached the passage Eliyä herself had recited as the vile medicine dragged her under:

“*They wrote it all down. So the Nāya would not be forgotten...*”

The lines caught on his tongue, slurred by wine that trickled down his chin. The velien took him too, though not from fever or torn flesh. His was the pain of memory.

He had told her he would learn of the Nāya Aī for her. But that day would have to wait.

*

Hāikimi stirred, mind clouded, to a tap on his shoulder. A crescent scar of perfect amaranth. The world swam back into focus through the haze of wine and moon-blood. The boy stopped tapping him as Mehrad entered. Shäl’Ash’s first heat pressed against the shutters, baking the chamber — heat he had not felt since his return.

On the floor, the empty bottle of Il’Red lay discarded, its red stains dried into the sand.

“Ah, Master Hāikimi,” Mehrad’s voice tumbled as he stepped inside. “Yes, I think you’re awake now. That’s... quite all right, quite all right.” He wrung his hands, shifting his weight as the marked boy left the chamber.

What hour was it? It did not matter. The moon had moved. *The babes.*

“They’re stirring,” Mehrad added quickly, voice dropping to a whisper. “Threatening to open their eyes. I wouldn’t wake you from such a—” his glance snagged on the empty bottle, “—such a deep sleep.”

At this, Eliyā stirred, her lashes crusted with sleep. The Blazing Sun pried the shutters apart, peeling the room open.

“Let me see them.” It was not a question.

Mehrad darted to the cot where the babes stirred, his hands restless, sweat already slicking his brow. The rising heat thinned his paste, made his movements quick, anxious. Hāikimi followed, a rush of blood to his head, trying to mask the wine’s husk still on his breath.

Again, the boy was first. He shook side to side like an egg cracking, his scream sharp but strong, no weaker than any son of Ilhara. Mehrad lifted him high. The child’s brow furrowed, and when his eyes opened they glowed deep brown, rich as varnished vashlar. Pure. Alive. The same colour as Eliyā’s. Seeing the world for the first time did not trouble him.

“A boy of Threnna no doubt. Born on the turn of Kāmaar,” Mehrad declared.

Eliyä raised her arms, a command without words. Mehrad faltered.

“It is no longer Nat-Kāmaar,” Hāikimi said, voice roughened with wine. The healer recoiled at the scent, but obeyed, lowering the brown-eyed boy into his mother’s arms. Eliyä received him cautiously, her outreached arms tugged at her healing stomach. She looked deep in to her son’s eyes as he cooed at her chest. His sister was less willing. The Silver Light scraped against her as she screamed, resisting the moment. She rocked as her brother had, but each motion seemed to wound her, as though the act of being born still tore at her. And then, because all children of Ilhara must, her eyes opened.

The room stilled.

Mehrad saw them first: two raw emeralds, irises shifting, alive with green. Then Hāikimi saw, and his chest seized. Heart racing, gut twisting, every limb aflame. Eliyä was last. She looked upon her daughter’s eyes only after she had already read the truth in her husband’s face.

“What is wrong?” Eliyä demanded, their son crying against her chest.

Mehrad hurried to place the second child in her arms, though his gaze clung to the girl’s face.

“Nothing,” Hāikimi lied, though his cracked throat and the heat in the chamber betrayed him.

He dug into his satchel, pulling out the parchment he had found in the wet sand. He pressed it into Mehrad’s trembling hands. The healer read in silence, and when he looked up, his eyes carried no surprise, only a weary acceptance, duller than his usual fretful energy.

“Please!” Eliyä cried, both babes wailing in chorus with her. “What is wrong? My eyes aren’t lying to me.”

Hāikimi’s gaze stayed on Mehrad as he asked, low:

“You’ve heard the cries at night, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” Mehrad admitted. “I didn’t want to cause alarm. But Daerween is... less safe by the day Master Hāikimi.” His eyes darted to Hāikimi, never to Eliyä.

“You told me you hadn’t heard them, Hāikimi.” Her voice cut through her exhaustion, anger laced with betrayal.

“The Okharyn,” Hāikimi said at last, to Mehrad, but loud enough for the room. “I saw him. Twice. The first time, he told me of the Zinheer—the green eyes—how they filled his ledger now. The second time, I saw him hanging from a tree.”

Eliyā’s breath caught. The children did not stop crying.

“I saw the Zinheer. Fleeing.”

Mehrad cut in, his words fast, urgent:

“Yes. Daerween—the south is no place for babes touched by Ishaarn’s green now. If she carries those eyes, they will find her.”

“But why?” Eliyā burst out, her voice cracking, half confusion, more sorrow.

Mehrad wrung his hands, then forced himself to look at her directly. “The why is not always important in Ilhara. Not now. There has always been someone to blame. Now the Thrennan Front believe it is the Zinheer. And they are not safe.” His eyes flicked to the girl in her arms, scanning her as if the danger were already written there.

Hāikimi’s jaw tightened. His fighting hand spasmed, an old reflex stirring awake. “What can we do?”

“There is a healer in Moram,” Mehrad began.

“The north?” Eliyā cut in, her voice sharp. “There are more men of the Front there than anywhere. Hāikimi, can you do nothing?”

No. He felt it hollow in his chest, and his face betrayed it.

“Tell the healer,” Mehrad pressed, his voice faltering. “Say Mehrad lo-Kai sent you. They will know the weight of the message.” He wiped at his brow, sorrow leaking through his twitching cadence. “You must travel by night. Shäl’Ash is too bright.... Too many eyes.”

The word eyes burned him. Hāikimi blinked against it, but Eliyä's voice cut through again.

“When must we leave?”

The answer was already written between them. Hāikimi knew. And now Eliyä, too, was learning the weight of the First Eyes.

“Tonight,” the healer said.