Chapter One:

Bound by Loyalty and Grief

Notes/Edits:

“For Kiraz!” The chanting of a crowd now dead attacked the silence surrounding Einar of Clan Demelak.

He stood motionless at the threshold to the Hall of Ranzad, his boots resting atop a thin layer of dried blood that coated the vast chamber’s polished stone floor. He would have shuddered, had he the energy. Instead, his arms hung heavily by his sides as his eyes passed over the carnage left behind by the horde of monstrous invaders.

Memories cut through his exhaustion. The old man who ran into the Demelak quarters, terrified and mortally wounded. The young girl’s body he’d stepped over the last time he crossed this very hall, her blood-splattered face horrifying to behold.

Kalzhadan’s ultimate sacrifice…

Einar still hadn’t come to terms with that. Not during the entire time he’d hid deep in the mines with the handful of survivors, terrified that at any moment they’d be discovered and slaughtered.

How long had he been down in the mines that snaked under Mount Irzen? Four days? Five? He couldn’t say for sure. But now the invaders were gone, and the once-proud chamber stretching out before him was now nothing more than a hollowed-out relic of dwarven pride. No laughter reverberated across its expanse. No songs of triumph echoed against its vaulted ceiling. All that was left was an oppressive, suffocating stillness broken only by the occasional shuffle of the men working to gather the fallen from where they’d been slain.

Women, children, the elderly—none had been spared. The sight struck Einar harder than any clash of steel. Bit into his ears louder than any battle cry ever could.

Flickering lightstones, their glow fractured and dimmed, hung from their perches high overhead. They cast a wavering light that created restless shadows and made the carved granite pillars shudder and shift as if mourning the people who had so recently lived and loved within these walls. His eyes lingered on a depiction of the founding of Kiraz on the far wall. Beside it was the engraving commemorating the construction of the Crossroads Dam. Both were feats of dwarven engineering that had endured for millennia.

Neither matter now.

The strength, the resilience, the unity of the Khuzdul people—it had all fallen to ruin in just a single day. The lifeless forms beneath those carvings were proof of that, their stillness a stark contrast to the vibrant history immortalized above them.

Throughout the chamber, dwarven men worked in pairs, collecting and organizing the dead, placing them in neat rows along the walls. Some of the bodies had been shrouded in torn banners or stained tarps. Others lay exposed, their lifeless forms dressed in the blood-soaked remnants of their final moments. Faces Einar knew stared back at him, unseeing. He picked out Tarum’s blond hair amongst the sea of grays and browns, though the dwarf’s golden curls were dulled by congealed blood.

Tarum’s younger brother’s body had been placed next to the muscular dwarf. Yagvild’s face, once shaped by a knowing smile, now stared lifelessly upward, twisted in a frozen expression of pain. Beside him lay a woman who’d sold bread near the Demelak living quarters, her apron slashed and torn. Beside her, a child, no older than six, clutching a wooden toy in one hand.

Einar’s knees threatened to buckle as the enormity of the loss swelled, rising like a tide that threatened to pull him under. His breaths came harder, each one a struggle. The reality of the world he found himself in attacked his mind with cruel precision. He bit the inside of his cheek until a metallic taste joined the other foul flavors coating his mouth.

And yet, all that pain paled when his eyes landed upon Austri’s still form. The sight of his cousin’s face twisted the knife already buried deep inside Einar’s heart. The young dwarf’s lips, always so quick with a quip or a story, were parted slightly as if to speak, but no sound would ever come forth again. He’d been placed in a dignified pose, his arms crossed over his unmoving chest, but something seemed off.

Where’s his shield?

An odd thought, considering… But his mind was as numb as his body, floundering to find anything to moor upon. Not wishing to wallow in the agony of his grief, his eyes flitted across the room. Of his other friends, he could find no trace. Their absence carved a jagged furrow in his chest, the void almost too vast to bear.

He tried to swallow against the dryness in his throat, but his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He could almost taste the air—bitter with the metallic tang of dried blood and the faint, acrid bite of smoke that lingered long after the fires had been extinguished. He told himself to move, to step forward, but his legs refused to obey. He clenched and unclenched his fists, his fingers stiff as though the frost of death had seeped into them.

A hand fell upon his shoulder, firm but not harsh. The weight of it pulled his thoughts from the tide threatening to consume him. Einar shifted slightly, his unfocused eyes meeting the somber gaze of one of the king’s elite guards. The man stood like a sentinel of strength; his features subdued yet resolute. His armor, though dented and dulled, gleamed faintly in the fractured light of the hall.

“The king awaits.” The guard’s voice was little more than a low murmur, heavy with reverence. The simple words carried a weight that left no room for hesitation. No space for rebuttal.

Einar nodded, his mouth working, though it found no words of reply. Nearly forgotten, the note Kalzhadan had entrusted to him crinkled in his palm. His legs trembled as he willed them into action, each step an effort. His boots scraped against the blood-caked floor, the sound sharp in the oppressive silence.

The guard’s hand dropped away as Einar moved, its absence leaving him colder than before. Gripping the note tighter, his knuckles whitened as he crossed the daunting expanse of the hall. Their course led them to a figure kneeling in the center of it all, a man whose sorrow eclipsed even the vastness of the room itself.

The sight of King Bazanthar kneeling beside his family’s bodies was an image that struck deep. The great ruler, once a symbol of unwavering authority, wilted under the enormity of his grief. His broad shoulders slumped beneath a burden no king—no man—should ever need bear. Before him lay his wife and children, their small forms swathed in ceremonial cloth, pale faces peeking from beneath their shrouds as though in peaceful sleep.

The lightstones’ flickering glow danced over Bazanthar’s form, catching on the golden bands of his crown resting askew on his bowed head. He gripped his wife’s folded hands, his fingers trembling as he clutched at something beyond his reach. His other hand, clenched tightly by his side, quivered with a suppressed rage at odds with the raw sorrow etched into his features. His lips moved in either a silent prayer or lamentation—Einar could not tell which.

Halting mid-step, Einar’s breath caught in his throat. The sheer intimacy of the scene froze him in place, and he was loathed to intrude upon such a sacred, personal moment. He no longer saw this man as a mighty king, no commander of armies nor protector of the realm. This was a husband, a father, broken by loss, cradling the remains of all he held dear. The moment pressed upon Einar, squeezing the air from his lungs and twisting his heart in ways he had never known.

Even with the weight of Kalzhadan’s final message burning in his palm, he could not bring himself to close the distance. Not yet. Bazanthar’s grief was a force unto itself, and to approach him now would be an affront to its magnitude. Instead, Einar stood in silence, his hands knitting as he bore witness to the unbearable cost of leadership—and the fragility of the man who bore its crown.

And yet, Kalzhadan’s note refused to be ignored. He clutched the scrap of paper tightly, the edges pressing into his palm and reminding him of his duty. This was not just a message; it was the last words of the man who had taught him what it meant to stand, to fight, to endure. ‘The hardest battles are not fought with steel, boy, but with the heart.’ Kalzhadan’s voice echoed faintly in his memory, each word a lash driving him forward.

Closing the last few steps between him and his king, his presence was marked only by the faintest shuffle of his coal-stained clothing. His mouth opened, dry and hesitant, but he did not speak. Could not speak. He clenched his jaw, forcing himself to focus. Dropping his gaze to the note again, a shiver ran through him as he fiddled with it. He forced his voice to steady, though it came out a whisper more to himself than anyone else. “My king?”

The king’s shoulders shifted as Einar’s voice broke the silence. Without removing his gaze from his wife’s body, Bazanthar spoke, his voice raw. “Who is this?”

The guard who’d been with Einar stepped forward, pressing his sword sheath against his hip so it wouldn’t make any sound. “A survivor, my king. Found emerging from the mines. He says he bears a message.”

As if it took all his strength, Bazanthar rotated his head, his tear-streaked face emerging from the shadows. His gaze fixed upon Einar, heavy and piercing despite the sorrow weighing him down. The sheer force of it rooted Einar where he stood, and his grip tightened on the crinkling paper as if it might protect him from this man’s wrath.

Hovering over the kneeling king, Einar lowered his head, tried to make himself small. His hand shook as he held out the note. “I was told to give this to you, sire.” Despite his attempt to strengthen his voice, his words came out low, instantly swallowed by the vastness of the hall.

Bazanthar’s bloodshot eyes shifted to Einar’s offering, his brow furrowing. Slowly, he rose to his feet, the movement deliberate and burdened. “What is it?” His voice was rough, like stone scraping against stone, but gone was the pain from before, replaced by the weight of a command. The words of a man used to being obeyed.

Einar hesitated, tried to swallow once more without success. “A message.” He paused, dreading saying his mentor’s name aloud for fear that it would break him. “From Kalzhadan.”

At the mention of the name, Bazanthar’s gaze sharpened, grief giving way to a sudden intensity. His eye twitched, the barest indication of his restrained urgency. “What does it say?”

Einar’s throat tightened, his heart thumping loud in his ears. He glanced at the note, then back at the king. “I don’t know, sire.” He failed to keep his voice from breaking. “I… I never read it.”

Bazanthar’s lips pressed into a thin line, his jaw clenching. For a long, agonizing moment, he simply stared at Einar, the tension between them stretching taut, heavy with unspoken weight. Then, he extended his hand, palm open and waiting.

Einar’s fingers trembled as he offered the note, the simple motion carrying the weight of the world. Slowly, he placed it into the king’s waiting hand, his heart breaking as if surrendering a part of himself with it.

He stood frozen, holding his breath as the king’s eyes dart across whatever Kalzhadan had written. At first, Bazanthar’s face remained unreadable, the lines of grief carved deep into his features. But as his gaze lingered on the note, something shifted. The raw sorrow did not fade; it coiled inward, sharpening. Condensed into something colder. Harder. His jaw tightened, the faint quiver in his lips disappearing as they pressed into a tight, grim line.

The paper crumpled in his grip as his hand trembled, not with weakness but with barely restrained fury. The echo of the sound rippled through the hall, loud enough to make Einar flinch. The fingers of Bazanthar’s other hand curled around the hilt of his sword, the knuckles turning stark white as he clenched the weapon so tightly it seemed his skin might split.

Einar wanted to speak, to ask what the note said, but the weight of the moment rendered him dumb. Bazanthar’s gaze remained fixed on Kalzhadan’s message for a long, excruciating moment before the dwarf lifted his eyes.

The softness grief had pressed into his features was gone. In its place was a simmering rage, controlled but threatening to erupt at any moment. It radiated from him like heat off a forge, filling the vast hall with a palpable, almost oppressive intensity. Whatever words Kalzhadan had left behind, their impact was carved into the king’s face—a transformation from a man broken by sorrow to one reforged by fury.

Bazanthar lowered the note slowly. The crumpled edges of the fragile paper mirrored the delicate border between the king’s sorrow and the resolve now hardening within him. Without a word, his gaze swept past Einar. The fire burning behind his eyes promised that no part of this tragedy would go unanswered.

Bazanthar stood motionless for a heartbeat longer before beckoning to one of the elite guards who waited in stoic silence nearby. The guard came to his side, his boots barely making a sound on the blood-slick stone. He stopped just short of the king, his posture stiff, hands resting lightly on the hilt of his blade as though bracing for what was to come.

Bazanthar’s voice, though low, cut through the silence like a blade. “Lothrim.” The name carried a venom that made the word itself seem dangerous. His features worked into a grimace, and he spat his words through gritted teeth. “This was his doing.”

A shadow washed over the guard’s face and a faint ripple passed through the others. The slightest shifts in their stances betrayed the weight of the king’s words. Grim looks were exchanged, their eyes reflecting a mixture of sorrow and barely-contained fury.

Bazanthar’s tone hardened further, his sorrow fully subsumed by the cold steel of his resolve. “He will pay.” His voice gained strength with each word as his eyes found the still form of his wife. “They will all pay for what they have done.”

The guard nearest him straightened, his fingers tightening around the heft of his warhammer. A subtle ripple of movement passed through the other guards as they too adjusted their postures, their backs straightening, their grips firming. Though no one spoke, the unity of purpose was unmistakable. Vengeance had been named, and now it belonged to them all.

The weight of their resolve pressed against Einar like a rising storm. His pulse quickened, and he couldn’t look away from the sight of Bazanthar and his men—stone-faced and resolute, bound by loyalty and grief.

One guard, his face partly shadowed by the flickering light, shifted toward Einar. Their eyes met, and for a moment, the rest of the hall faded away. The dwarf gave a single, almost imperceptible nod.

That small gesture, simple as it was, carried more weight than any command. It wasn’t just an acknowledgment; it was an acceptance. A silent assurance that despite his youth, Einar was part of their shared purpose.

His chest swelled, his sorrow and anger crystallizing into something harder, something that surged with strength. The memory of Hakon’s final scream—cut short as the massive dwarf was dragged beneath a swarm of small, brown creatures—flashed through his mind. He clenched his fists, his nails biting into his palms. His own grief morphed into a tool, a weapon to wield alongside the rest of them. The laughter he once shared with Austri echoed faintly in his ears, its absence a void filled by the shared rage wafting from the small group. Whatever lay ahead, Einar knew he would not falter. He couldn’t. This was no longer just the king’s burden—it was theirs.

It is mine.

“Einar!” A voice rang out across the hall, shattering the heavy silence like a stone dropped into still water.

Turning, relief surged through Einar as he caught sight of his uncle, Thranrik, striding briskly between the rows of the dead. His uncle’s face, lined and weary, betrayed the weight of their shared loss. But there was still strength in his step, an urgency that pulled Einar from the moment.

Thranrik came to a halt before the king, his head bowing slightly in respect. “Your Majesty.” After the barest of pauses, he turned to Einar, his expression softening just enough to show his concern. “Come, lad.” Resting a firm hand on Einar’s shoulder, his uncle turned him away from the king and his guards. “Your father will be most anxious to see you alive and whole.”

Einar hesitated, his gaze drifting back to Bazanthar. Him and his men remained locked in their grim circle, voices low but charged, their plans for vengeance unfolding in hushed tones. The king’s broad frame loomed over the group, Kalzhadan’s note still clutched in his fist.

Thranrik gave Einar’s shoulder a gentle squeeze, pulling his attention back. “There’s nothing more you can do here, lad.” His tone was as much a plea as a command.

Reluctantly, Einar allowed himself to be guided away, his legs heavy as though the weight of Mount Irzen itself sought to keep him there. But even as Thranrik guided him away, Einar’s thoughts stayed fixed on the king. The image of Bazanthar, broken but unyielding, surrounded by his loyal guard, burned itself into Einar’s soul.

This was no longer about survival. It was about justice. Retribution. The faces of those he’d lost—his friends, his family, the people who he’d lived next to his entire life—flickered through his mind. They deserved justice. They deserved to be avenged. He clenched his fists as a bitter certainty took root within him.

Whoever this Lothrim is, he must pay.

Nothing else mattered.

Chapter Two:

Bitter Remnants

Notes/Edits: Birah – mom’s name

Einar’s boots echoed in the stone corridor leading to the Demelak living quarters. The rhythmic sound was too steady, too calm for the storm of emotions raging inside him. His uncle Thranrik walked ahead without a word. Stiff backed, his shoulders were tense, like a crossbeam struggling to hold back the weight of the mountain above. The older dwarf had offered no words of comfort, no hint of the fate of the rest of their family. Einar craved both, anything that would loosen the knot in his chest. But his uncle remained silent.

Does my mother live?

During the days he had hidden deep in the mines under the city, he had thought of her often. Though he never allowed his mind to linger on what may or may not have happened to her. When he did, his thoughts were always dark and painful. Through desperation more than anything, he clung to the hope that the barricades they had erected held, and that his family was safe and whole. However, marching toward a definitive answer to that question had his stomach churning.

Einar’s throat was dry despite the humidity clinging to the air. His thoughts battered him like hammer strikes, images of that day bubbling up with painful clarity. The dining hall. The sudden appearance of the injured old dwarf. His voice breaking in terror as he babbled about monsters invading the city. The horde of creatures flooding the room like a nightmare come to life.

He squeezed his eyes shut, but it did not stop the flood of memories. Austri’s roar as he threw a bench at one of the beasts. The sickening crunch of breaking bones. The look in Tarum’s eyes—calm and resolute—as he took command in an attempt at rallying the Firebrands. The sound of Yagvild’s scream cut short by the swarm’s claws.

Hakon’s death…

Einar stumbled, catching himself on the cold stone wall. His uncle didn’t stop, however. The older dwarf’s boots thumped softly on the floor ahead, never hesitating. Einar forced himself to continue, though his legs had gone numb.

The hallway grew darker, the fractured lightstones casting flickering shadows on the walls. Thinking on it, he couldn’t remember seeing even one of the magical stones left whole by the invaders.

Why? Why destroy everything?

He could think of no reason that made any sense. The beasts had even ravaged the intricate murals adorning the walls. Deep gouges marred the carvings of Clan Demelak’s legacy leading to his family’s living quarters. Entire sections of reliefs were clawed away, jagged edges cutting the stone like festering wounds. His gaze lingered on a fractured scene depicting the creation of lightstones, their clan’s great achievement. The once-proud history of his people had been defiled by creatures that craved nothing save destruction.

But those scars paled compared to what he feared awaited ahead.

Mother.

His insides constricted. She’d been there that day—there, when the beasts attacked. With his aunts and his cousins and his elders. His entire extended family of several generations. After the initial fight, after Kalzhadan and the others had driven the monsters off, they had fortified the doorway between the entrance hall and the market hall. They’d piled tables and benches as high as they could in the hopes of holding the creatures at bay. Elderly dwarves armed with ancient spears, ceremonial halberds, or whatever makeshift weapons could be fashioned had manned that barricade. It should have been enough to protect those inside as he and his friends went to check on the queen. It should have held.

It must have held.

But what if it hadn’t? The thought slithered through his mind like a venomous serpent, cold and unrelenting. He couldn’t wait. He needed to know, and he needed to know now.

“Uncle? My mother?” The word came out as a croak, his voice little more than a whisper. It echoed in the vast corridor, hollow and unanswered. Thranrik did not so much as glance back, his steps unyielding, his silence like a finality Einar wasn’t ready to hear.

All too soon, the entrance of the Demelak living quarters loomed ahead. An arched doorway that stood in eerie silence. Einar’s heart pounded harder with each step. He clenched his jaw in an attempt to stifle the terrified wail threatening to escape.

No. The barricade held. Mother will be waiting for me. She has to be.

But as Thranrik paused at the doorway, his shoulders sagging enough to show how painful it was for him to continue, a cold certainty spread through Einar. The answer was carved into his uncle’s features. In the way his hand brushed the wall to steady himself. The look of utter loss in the dwarf’s eyes as he stared back at Einar.

The barricade did not hold.

Vision blurred by tears, Einar’s throat constricted. The hallway stretched out endlessly before him. He came to a stop, staring past his uncle and into the shadows beyond. His mother’s face rose up—her warm smile, her sing-song voice. He dreaded what lay beyond that doorway with every fiber of his being. He didn’t want to confirm the dark thoughts that had plagued him since he’d fled into the mines.

But there was no turning back.

With a shuddering breath, he stepped forward. A cold, stagnant air hit him, carrying faint traces of death, underscored by the bitter remnants of food left to rot.

The entrance hall was a scene of devastation frozen in time. Overturned chairs lay scattered across the floor, their legs jutting out at unnatural angles like broken limbs. Tables that had once hosted laughter and shared meals now stood in ruin. Stone bowls and cups had toppled in the chaos, the remains of unfinished breakfasts strewn across the ground. Crumbs of khuzlem bread mingled with dried puddles of ale and stew, crusted over with filth. A chair sat against the far wall, splintered down the center as though struck by a tremendous force.

It took everything in him to keep going, but he knew if he stopped, he’d fall to the ground, his life ending right there.

Would that be so bad?

Passing through the entrance hall, his eyes confirmed what his grief-stricken mind had already deduced—the barricade that should be standing between the two halls had been reduced to little more than scattered debris.

Einar froze at the threshold. The wreckage in the large room seemed both eerily familiar and grotesquely foreign. Shattered chairs and overturned tables lay everywhere. Most were little more than piles of splintered wood, while others were clawed as though the beasts had attacked them in their frenzy. All lay silent—a place where death had had no mercy.

The only remains of the barricade was a battered table that had been shoved haphazardly to one side. He reached out, his fingers brushing the cracked surface, allowing the jagged edges to bite into his skin. He welcomed the sharp pain the motion brought.

His uncle had already crossed much of the space, heading for the Great Hall. Feet heavy, Einar followed the elder dwarf. This space had once been the heart of their clan. Now screams echoed in his mind as though the walls still carried their resonance. His mother’s voice might have been among them. He swallowed hard, his brain disconnected from the reality around him.

I should have stayed. I should not have abandoned them.

The thought struck with bitter clarity. He had trusted Kalzhadan. Had followed his orders without question. But what did leaving gain them? The queen was dead when they arrived. Kalzhadan should have known that. He must have known. So why had they gone? Why had he led the Firebrands away when staying could have meant a different outcome for his family?

For my mother!

A muscle in his jaw twitched as his gaze swept over the destruction. If they had stayed, they could have fought. He could have fought. Maybe it wouldn’t have made any difference. Maybe the horde would have overwhelmed them regardless. But maybe...

Maybe I could have saved her.

Or at the very least, died with her. That would have been better than the guilt and shame and anger clawing at his soul.

The disarray here in the Great Hall was no different from the others—scattered goods, broken stalls, and deep gouges scarring the stone floor where the battle had raged. The air stank of rot and stale blood, stronger than in the outer halls. In the far corner of the room sat a mound of bodies heaped into a pile like refuse. His stomach churned.

Not dwarves, thank Siem.

Beasts. Their twisted, monstrous forms lay piled together, the stench of their decay festering in the stagnant air. Flies buzzed in a ceaseless drone over their bloated corpses. The number was uncountable­—scores, at least. Perhaps over a hundred. The barricade hadn’t held, no. But the defenders had not gone down without making the invaders pay.

A flicker of pride slashed through his grief. His family had fought till the bitter end. But where were the bodies of his kin? Like the outer halls, the Great Hall was devoid of Khuzdul dead. It was as if they’d been swept away. Taken somewhere beyond the devastation. Beyond the pain. Beyond the death. The absence was unsettling, the emptiness gnawing at the edges of his mind. He couldn’t shake the feeling that the silence itself was waiting to devour him.

Mother?

The unspoken question hung like a weight.

As he reached the far side of the Great Hall he slowed, his gaze drawn to the stairwell climbing into the darkness. A shuddered breath wracked him. At the top of those stairs lay his family’s apartments, as well as answers. Answers he wasn’t certain he wanted.

His uncle stood at the base of the steps, his hand resting on the rough stone as if bracing for what lay ahead. Thranrik’s eyes met Einar’s, solemn and weary. Without a word, he began the slow ascent, his movements heavy. Deliberate.

Einar’s feet became rooted to the ground. Memories of home tugged at him like ghosts—his mother’s voice calling him to rise in the morn, his father’s booming laugh echoing off the stone walls. He’d never considered that those moments would ever come to an end. Now, each thought tightened around his throat like a noose.

His legs moved of their own accord, slow and mechanical. The narrow stairwell swallowed him, each step upward like ascending an entire mountain. The walls pressed in closer, the air thick with the putrid stench of death. Every breath became a struggle for survival.

The silence is unbearable.

His thoughts wouldn’t stop—images of his family plagued him in relentless waves. Aunt Kalla singing lullabies to his younger cousins by the hearth. Great Uncle Lodra, his booming laugh filling the hall. Little Soria and how much she loved playing with her dolls. It was as if he could hear their voices now—a faint echo in the suffocating stillness.

Please, Siem, let them all alive.

Yet deep down, he knew. The emptiness of the halls had already screamed the truth at him. He clenched his jaw, grinding his teeth until his ears rang. He wouldn’t believe it. Not yet.

Not until I see them with my own eyes.

The stairwell pressed in further, tighter, its dim light struggling to guide him. Thranrik reached the top first, pausing before the wide archway leading into the apartments. Einar’s breath hitched, his knees threatening to give way. He fought against the paralyzing dread clawing at his gut and forced himself to ascend the final few steps.

The shadows beyond the arch taunted him, heavy with the weight of its finality. Einar’s heart screamed in pain as he stepped into the waiting stillness.

The cold hit him first. A bitter chill that settled deep in his core. Whether it came from the stone or from the rows of lifeless bodies, he couldn’t say.

The dead had been laid with care, each placed on a bed in one of the many rooms. Hands lay folded across chests. Faces appeared serene in a death that had not been kind. He recognized them all, of course—cousins who’d shared meals, aunts who’d ensured all were hale and happy, and elders who’d passed on the traditions of their people. His gaze lingered on one of his great aunt’s faces. Teretha’s lined features were oddly soft, as though death had stolen her pain.

Each lost kin he passed brought a fresh wave of grief. He tried to control his breathing, but the silence pressed down on him, thick and stifling. Memories assailed him—of life, of laughter, of the warmth once shared. But it was all gone now. Wiped out by the merciless creatures who’d invaded their sanctuary.

He paused beside a cousin’s tiny form. Rasnik. Barely old enough to hold a hammer, the boy lay next to his mother, Aunt Lilant. How many games had Einar played with the child? How long had he spent teaching Rasnik how to tie knots. The urge to kneel down beside them and beg for their forgiveness overcame Einar, but he forced himself to keep walking.

His Great Uncle Kallan lay on a bed in the next chamber, his graying hair neatly arranged as if he’d prepared himself for sleep.

Einar drew in a deep breath, but it did little to steady his nerves. His eyes darted from face to face, each step carrying him closer to his parents’ quarters. With each body he passed, he fought the rising tide of despair that threatened to overwhelm him, drive him to the ground wailing in grief. The urge to turn and run struck, but there was nowhere to go. Nowhere to escape the truth about what happened to—

“Mother…” The word was more a prayer than anything. A plea that echoed in the chambers of his mind. His boots drug against the stone as he crossed the last few paces. He stopped just outside the room, his hand gripping the doorframe for support. A low murmur, too faint to distinguish, drifted from within—a voice, soft and broken. His father’s voice.

Entering his parent’s quarters, Einar’s world narrowed to a singular point. His mother’s still form lay on her bed, hands folded over her unmoving chest. Had he not known better, he could easily have believed she was simply resting after a long, hard day. Her face, serene and peaceful, appeared untouched by the violence that had stolen her from him. Her hair, which she always braided with such care, rested loosely around her shoulders.

The woman who’d been his entire world—the one whose warmth had always shielded him from the cold realities of life—was gone. The truth of the moment pressed down on him harder than the entire mountain above their heads. He stumbled forward, his knees threatening to give out as he gripped the edge of the bed for support.

“Mother…” The word came out hoarse, little more than a gasp. Something inside shattered, and the tears he’d held back for so long welled up and blurred his vision. His body shook as he sank to his knees beside the bed. A raw and unrelenting grief surged through him, and each sob sliced at him like a blade.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he fought to banish the images from his mind, but they wouldn’t let him go. Her smile. Her voice calling him to supper. The stories she’d told when he was a boy. All reduced to just that—memories. All stolen by the beasts who’d clawed their way into their home.

Yet underneath his sorrow, something sharpened, hardening into a fury that burned low and dangerous in the pit of his stomach. His nails dug into his palms as an overwhelming urge to kill rose up. A desire to use his bare hands to rip apart those responsible for stealing his entire world from him.

Through the hate pounding in his ears, a broken moan pulled him from the depths of his sorrow and rage.

Eyes bloodshot and distant, his father sat on the other side of the bed slumped in a chair. The elder dwarf’s broad-shouldered frame sagged. As if he’d been hollowed out by the weight of his loss. And he looked older somehow. Impossibly older. As though the two tendays he’d been away had aged him by decades.

Their eyes met, and for a long, agonizing moment, neither spoke. What words could be said? Nothing could encapsulate the enormity of the pain they shared.

A tear rolled down his father’s cheek, his chin quivering as he struggled to retain some semblance of composure. The sight of the man’s grief tore down the last of Einar’s resolve.

Rushing to the man, Einar dropped down beside him. His father reached for him, and Einar leaned into the embrace. They clung to each other as if they were the only living things left in their shattered world. Father and son wept openly in the silence of the room, their grief ringing off the walls.

“We’ll make them pay for this.” Einar’s head jerked toward the speaker. Uncle Thranrik stood in the doorway, his expression hard as granite as he passed tear-filled eyes over his sister’s body.

The words sank into Einar’s soul, fusing with the grim symphony reverberating through every fiber of his being. Returning his gaze to his mother’s form, his hands balled into fists.

There will be no peace. Not until the monsters that slaughtered my family are whipped from the isle of Hârn.

The thought flowed through his mind like molten iron, reshaping his sorrow into a smoldering hatred.

Lothrim…

The name hissed through him like a curse.

A rustle of movement drew his attention back to the doorway. Durvik, one of Einar’s cousins, had joined them, his face pale but resolute. The young dwarf inhaled a shuddered breath before speaking. “The king has put out a call.” His voice was steadier than Einar expected, though his words carried the weight of the world. Durvik’s gaze flicked between Einar, their uncle, and Einar’s father. “Every able-bodied Khuzdul is to assemble in the Hall of Ranzad.”

The words hung heavily in the air, the echoes of Bazanthar’s voice replaying in his mind. The king had been consumed by grief, his entire family slaughtered just like Einar’s. Yet that grief had transformed into a chilling resolve—a resolve Einar now welcomed.

His father rose slowly, his face twisting in pain as he did. It was only then that Einar noticed the blood-stained wrappings around the dwarf’s right leg. “You’re hurt!?”

The man looked down with a nod. “Aye. Took a spear from one of the nasty bastards during the fight to retake the city.” He grunted. “It’s nothing.”

But it wasn’t nothing. He couldn’t even put any weight on it as he tried to make his way around the bed.

“I always told Birah you were too stubborn by half, Baldrek.” While the words were said in jest, no humor threaded through Uncle Thranrik’s tone. “The boy said all able-bodied Khuzdul.”

His father waved a dismissive hand. “I won’t stay behind as the rest of you hunt down those responsible for taking her away from me. I won’t!”

When he reached the other side of the bed, Thranrik pushed the injured dwarf. Little more than a nudge, really. Yet it was enough to force him to plop down on the bed beside his dead wife. “I doubt you could make it to Ranzad on your own, Baldrek, much less do whatever it is the king bids us do.”

His father snarled up at his brother-in-law. “I’ll at least go and hear the king’s words!”

The two dwarves stared at each other for a moment before Thranrik sighed and shook his head. “Too stubborn by half.”

“And don’t you forget it!” Baldrek fought to regain his feet. “Now get over here and lend me a shoulder! The king is waiting!”

Einar stood for a moment longer as his kin made their awkward exit, leaving him alone with his mother. The weight of grief was still there, but it no longer threatened to crush him—it fueled him. His gaze lingered on her serene face, burning the memory of her into his mind. The warmth and kindness she’d given him in life would remain, but not here. Not in this place of death.

This is no longer home.

“Goodbye, Mother.” He placed a hand upon hers. “I’ll make them pay for what they did to you.”

His footsteps echoed in the small chamber as he followed after his father, uncle, and cousin. More of his kin stood waiting in the communal living area. As one, they made their way to the stairwell leading down to the lower floor. At the threshold, Einar hesitated, casting one last glance at the room that had been his world. Rage twisted in his gut, pulsing through his veins. He didn’t flinch from it. He embraced it.

I’ll make them pay with my dying breath.

The mountain above him pressed down harder than ever—not as a burden this time, but as a part of him. Strong. Unbreakable. His sorrow hardened into a fury that he would wield it like a warhammer. And one by one, those responsible for his mother’s death, for the death of all the innocent women and children whose home had become their tomb, would fall under its head.

Chapter Three: The King’s Calls

Vengeance

Notes/Edits:

The vastness of the Hall of Ranzad swallowed every sound, as if it could not bear another heartbroken sob. Another mournful whisper. Cracked lightstones, those that remained, clung to their perches high above, their uneven glow casting flickering shadows over the rows of lifeless bodies. The living threaded between the dead, their heads downcast, their murmurs subdued, as though afraid they’d disturb the suffocating quiet.

Craftsmen, miners, merchants, and farmers filed into the hall in silent waves, and soon the room became a portrait of grief in its many stages. The faces of the surviving Khuzdul bore the weight of their loss. Tears streaked down dirt-stained cheeks of many. Some walked listlessly, their eyes distant and hollow. Others shifted from foot to foot, their breaths sharp, their anger simmering just beneath the surface of their pain.

Einar kept his hands at his sides, fists tightening and loosening as he fought to control the torrent of emotions plaguing him. His gaze darted between the pale faces of his fallen kin, his fallen friends, his fallen people. He walked beside his father and Uncle Thranrik, Baldrek still leaning on his brother-in-law for support. The rest of his extended family surrounded them. Uncles and cousins Einar had spent his entire life with. Each not only carried their own burden of loss, but the entire clan’s.

The air itself hung heavy. A stifling, suffocating oppression that had never existed in this place before. It carried the strong scent of death, though many braziers had been placed throughout the chamber in an attempt to mask the stench. Einar licked his dry lips, the tang of salt and iron being his only reward.

At the top of the stairs leading to the West Gate, Bazanthar emerged like a shadow from the past. The place where he now stood the very spot where he’d spoken to his people before the hunting expedition that seemed so long ago. His elite guards flanked him, their armor polished but unadorned. Their grim expressions matched the king’s.

Light glinted off the king’s crown, shining briefly in the dim glow. Something Einar now saw more as a cruel reminder of the man’s burden rather than the symbol of his power. Shadows deepened the lines on Bazanthar’s face, exaggerating the hollows beneath his eyes. Exhaustion rested upon his shoulders, but it did not consume him. Beneath his sorrow, a fire smoldered. A dangerous, unrelenting fury.

The crowd fell silent as the king’s boots struck the stone with a measured force. The sheer gravity of his pain reflected in those who remained of a once proud kingdom.

Einar’s eyes followed the king’s every step—a solemn figure who carried not only his own loss, but the weight of all their suffering. Grief twisted inside Einar as he waited to hear what the man had to say. Yet there was something else, too. Something fighting to burst through his pain and misery.

The crowd held their collective breath as Bazanthar took his place at the center of the hall. The king’s voice broke the suffocating silence with an authority that settled over the gathered dwarves like a comforting blanket. “We, each of us, have suffered more than any Khuzdul ever has. More than anyone ever should.” Sorrow dripped from his tone. “Our women—our wives, our sisters, our aunts and grandmothers—should have been here to embrace us upon our return. Our children—” His voice cracked, and he took a moment to compose himself. “Our sons and our daughters, should have been here, excited to hear the grand tales of our hunt. And our elders should have been here to show us their pride for supporting our people.” Bazanthar took a deep, shuddered breath as a ripple passed through the crowd. Some in attendance bowed their heads. Others clenched their jaws.

Einar’s gaze dropped to his feet, the king’s words a hammer blow to his heart. He dared a glance at his father. Though the man’s leg could not support his full weight, the dwarf stood rigid without his Thranrik’s aid, eyes glistening but unyielding.

Bazanthar’s voice softened, the shared pain palpable in his every word. “We have lost so much. So many…” The hall grew still, the very air weeping in sorrow.

“But our story does not end here!” His voice rose, grief hardening into anger. Determination. “Those responsible for this will pay.”

A chill ran through Einar as the king’s words took on a fierce edge. Bazanthar straightened, his eyes burning with a fire that cut through the dim light like molten steel. “Lothrim.” The name fell from his lips, reverberating through the hall. Murmurs surged like an undercurrent through those gathered, rising and falling as the name spread from one dwarf to another. Recognition. Fear. Outrage.

“He is no longer just a southern warlord whose ambitions we thought were a human problem.” His words dripped with bitterness. “Lothrim has brought his chaos—his hatred—into our very heart. For what purpose, we do not know. But he and his monstrous horde have desecrated our homes and slaughtered our kin. And while I won’t speak for all here, I shall not let his transgression stand!”

Einar’s fists tightened, blood roaring in his ears. He knew the name Lothrim—the powerful wizard from the south. Kalzhadan had spoken of him once, warning of the dangers when unchecked ambition met dark power. But his words were of a distant kingdom. Of a distant threat. One in the world of men. One that should never have reached Kiraz, much less penetrated its mighty fortifications.

Why?

“Our scouts report that Lothrim’s forces are retreating south.” Bazanthar rose his arm indicating the direction. “They seek to reach Lake Benath where ships must be waiting to carry them back to their accursed lands. But hear me now—Lothrim will not escape! By my oath and honor, he will never see his home again! Nor will his horde live to tell the tale of what they did to Kiraz!”

A fire ignited in the crowd, anger spreading like a contagion.

“We spent the last tenday hunting to sustain our families only to return to find them taken from us!” Bazanthar roared, his voice reverberating off the stone walls. “Now I ask those willing to join me on a hunt to bring them justice!”

The hall erupted as every voice joined together. “For Kiraz!” Dwarves who had been on the brink of collapse now stood tall, fists pumping in the air as a collective cry tore from their throats. “For Kiraz!”

Fury washed over Einar like a tidal wave. His sorrow twisted, reshaping itself into a hardened resolve. His voice joined the cacophony, raw and powerful. “For Kiraz!” This was no longer a gathering of craftsmen and miners. Farmers and merchants. No. They were warriors forged by loss and rage, bound together by a singular purpose—vengeance.

Bazanthar cleared his throat, pulling all eyes back to him. His voice cut through the hall like a hammer striking an anvil. “Then we are of a single mind. Go. Gather your weapons, or whatever you can use as a weapon. The spears and crossbows we took with us on the hunt will pierce flesh just as easily as they pierced hide. Mason hammers, mallets, and sledges will break bones just as easily as they broke rock. Shovels, bellows rods, and pickaxes will work for justice as they did to build this place.” His gaze swept the assembled dwarves, his words hard as tempered iron. “Make ready all you can, including food, tents, and travel gear, for we will march hard and fast to ensure these vermin do not escape us!”

A dark shadow passed over the king’s face. “They stole from us what can never be replaced. Never again will we hear our children laugh. Never again will we feel our wives’ loving embrace.” His gaze drifted over to where his family lay in their burial shrouds. “They have turned our joy into sorrow. Our songs into silence. And our home into a tomb.” Drawing his sword, Bazanthar waved it over the crowd. “So we shall turn their march into flight! Their victory into terror! And their lives into dust!”

The throng of dwarves erupted as the men released their pain, their rage, their unimaginable sorrow. The king didn’t wait for the noise to dissipate. “We march at first light!”

The fury in the room roared to life. “For Kiraz!” The weight of their grief had not lessened. “For Kiraz!” Their pain had not abated. “For Kiraz!” It had simply been reshaped. Reforged in the fire of their anger.

Einar stood among them, his breath coming hard and fast. The pulse of the crowd surged through him, a living force of wrath and determination. Every instinct screamed at him to embrace the fury, to give himself over to it fully. And yet—

A whisper. A single ember of doubt flickering beneath the inferno. ‘*What does it mean to be a warrior?’*

The whisper belonged to Kalzhadan, though the words had been spoken what seemed like a lifetime gone. The aging warrior had never spoken of revenge. Never of hatred. ‘A warrior does not fight for the thrill of battle, nor for the satisfaction of blood spilled. A warrior fights for something greater than himself.’

*‘Vengeance is not justice, boy.’* But the whisper was drowned out by the thunderous roar around him.

Tell that to my mother!

With a growl, Einar shoved the whisper down. Buried it beneath the molten weight of his grief. There was no room for doubt. Not now. Not when the image of his mother’s lifeless face still seared itself into his mind.

This was not about vengeance. It was about justice. It was about making sure those who did this could never do anything like it again. Could never hurt anyone again.

The dwarves began to disperse, voices still thick with fury as they moved to prepare for what was to come. Bazanthar stepped down from the stairs, his boots echoing with a quiet finality. He moved among his people, speaking in low voices with his commanders, ensuring all was in place for the coming march. Einar barely heard any of it. His thoughts churned, his blood burning hot in his veins.

He turned, seeking his father and uncle amidst the throng. Baldrek stood, his injured leg bearing his weight only by sheer will. Thranrik had a hand on his shoulder, the two of them speaking in hushed tones. Durvik stood nearby, his young face grim and set.

Einar met his father’s gaze, and at that moment, no words were needed. The same fire burned in both their eyes. The same fury. The same purpose.

There was nothing left to say. Only the battle that awaited.

For his mother, for all the lives taken so needlessly…

Lothrim and his monsters must die.