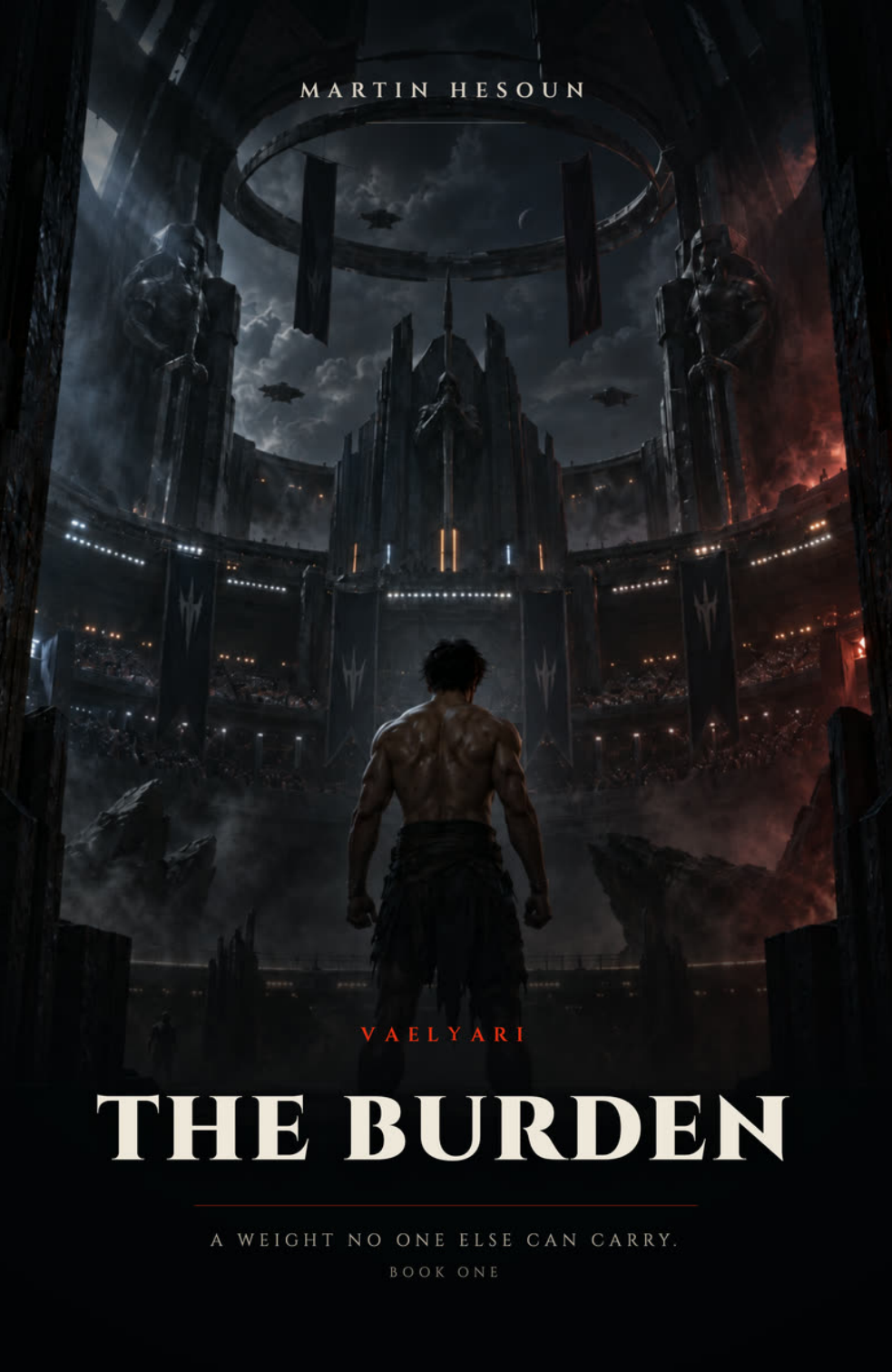




MARTIN HESOUN

VAELYARI

THE BURDEN

A WEIGHT NO ONE ELSE CAN CARRY.

BOOK ONE

A SAMPLE FROM THE BOOK

VAELYARI · BOOK ONE

THE BURDEN

Chapter 1

MARTIN HESOUN

CHAPTER 1

SILENCE

THE BIRDS WERE SILENT.

Adam noticed it before he came down off the ridge, and he stopped with one foot on a wet stone and the other in the air. The jungle below him sloped away into the valley the way it always did, green and overgrown, steam hanging above the canopy and the evening sun staining it rust. It looked the same as any other day. But it did not sound the same.

He knew this hour. At dusk the forest always broke into noise for a while before the night swallowed it. Hornbills, monkeys, insects, one sound over another, packed so thick a man could hide inside it. His father had explained it to him when he was small: *You'll never hide in silence here. Here you hide in noise.*

Now there was silence. Not complete. Insects hummed, water ran somewhere. But the layer above it was missing. The whole slope below him was holding its breath.

He set his foot down and let his weight settle onto it. The metal rings on his ankles slid half a centimeter lower, the way they did with every step and had for fourteen years, and he did not register them at all. He registered

the slope. He registered that in three days on the ridge he had not met a single person, which was as it should be, and that he was coming back down into a valley where nothing was calling, which was not.

He took the rope off his shoulder and coiled it so it would not catch if he had to run. Then he went down.

. . .

He did not take the path. The path was for anyone who came looking for the hiding place, and his father kept it deliberately worn. It ran two hundred meters from the hut into a blind ravine and ended in mud. Adam went alongside it through the trees, a little higher, the way they always went, and every twenty steps he stopped and listened.

Nothing. Water. Insects. His own breathing, slow, controlled.

At the big fallen tree that marked the boundary of what his father called *the yard*, he smelled smoke.

Not wood. He knew wood, they cooked on it every evening and his father made sure there was little of it and that it was dry. This was sharper, chemical, with a sweetish undertone that stuck to the roof of his mouth. Burned polymer. Something that does not get burned in a jungle, because it has no business being in a jungle.

He crouched behind the trunk and waited. He counted to a hundred. To two hundred. Nothing moved.

When you don't know what's in front of you, look first. Then listen. Then go. Whoever goes first dies first.

His father's voice was so natural inside him that he did not register it as a memory. It was simply the way thinking was done.

He climbed over the trunk.

. . .

The clearing was torn up.

He saw that first, before the dead on the ground. His father kept the yard smooth, packed hard, free of roots, because they trained on it and because on smooth ground every track shows. Now the earth was thrown about as if by a storm. Gouged turf, long furrows, one deep bowed trough where something heavy had gone down and slid sideways. The bamboo wall of the drying rack was staved in. The post he had learned to balance on when he was nine lay broken beside its own hole.

And then the bodies.

Three. They lay the way they had fallen, and Adam could tell that none of them had fallen by accident.

He didn't go to them right away. He circled the clearing along its edge, all of it, his eyes on the trees, not on the dead. The hut was standing. The door was wide open, and that was the first thing that hit him harder than the smoke. His father never left the door open. Not for a moment. Not when he went twenty steps for water. *An open door is an invitation. And we don't invite anyone.*

Behind the hut, the burned-out remains of something that had once had a shape were still smoking. Adam did not go near it; he saw metal, twisted, and something else

with a dull shine, and he knew it could wait. The trees first. The perimeter first.

When he had closed the circle and nothing had moved or lit up or growled, he stepped into the middle.

. . .

The first soldier lay on his back, his head turned to the sky in a way a head is not meant to turn. He was big. Even lying down you could see he was big, a head taller than Adam, shoulders that would not have fit through the hut's door. The armor was dark, matt, without a single shine to it, articulated into plates that followed the body. There was a dent in the chest. Not a bullet hole. A dent, the kind made when something terribly heavy leans on a plate and the plate decides to give.

Adam knelt and laid two fingers against the man's neck, under the edge of the collar. The skin was cold, but not icy. A few hours. Since morning, maybe.

His hands grew faintly heavier at the wrists as he lifted them, and his legs the same as he stood again. It was always like that. It was nothing. It was only the weight he had carried so long that his body could no longer imagine itself without it.

The second soldier lay on his side, curled, his hands at his belly. That one had not died fast. The ground around him was dark in a wide ring, and scratched into that dark ground was a line, long, shallow, ragged, as if someone had clawed at it for a long time and could not stop. His

weapon was still at his thigh, in a fastened holster. He never drew it.

The third lay furthest away, at the edge of the clearing, face in the ground, as if he had been trying to get out. That one had no helmet. Adam found it five meters on, in the brush, and turned it over: nothing inside but dark padding and the faint smell of sweat that was not human. Sharper, more metallic. A smell he had known all his life from exactly one other person.

Father.

No. Not father. Not these three.

He went back to the first, the second, the third. He turned each of them over. He looked at the faces again, carefully, as though he might have seen wrong the first time. All three were young, as far as that could be told with them, and Adam could tell: smooth skin at the temples, no lines at the eyes, hard jaws, whole teeth. None of them had his father's face. None of them had an old scar across the left brow running up into the hair. None of them had anything on his wrists but the edge of a glove.

He went over the clearing once more. The brush around the rim. The ravine behind the drying rack. The stream. He stepped into the hut and stood in it and looked.

His father was not there.

He stood in the middle of the torn ground and let it reach him. He allowed himself that. Ten breaths. Father is not here. Father is not here and three dead Vaelyari are,

and there is metal still smoking, and there are tracks, and the door is open.

He is not here.

Something in him wanted to shout, but it did not know in which direction. So it got nowhere and stayed inside, behind his breastbone, like a swallowed stone.

Ten breaths. Then hands again.

. . .

The hut first.

Inside, everything was in its place, which was worse than if everything had been thrown about. His father's cot against the wall. The table. The whetstones in a row by grit. Two bowls, turned upside down. Two knives on the hook. Both. So his father had not gone out with a knife. He had not expected them. Or he had expected them and did not want it to look as if he had.

Adam's cot was not anywhere, because Adam's cot was never anywhere. He slept on a mat that he rolled, tied and pushed into the cavity under the floorboards every morning before he cleaned his teeth. He had done it since the day they came here, since he was seven, and he had never asked why. It was simply what was done in the morning.

Now he stood over the board with his mat under it and understood for the first time in his life what he had been training for all those fourteen years.

No one may know that two live here.

He knelt and lifted the board. The mat was there, rolled and tied the way he had left it that morning, and beside it

his second shirt and the leather pouch with the things that were his and nobody else's. He left them. He put the board back. He ran his hand over it so it seated into the groove.

Whoever came in here saw the hut of one man.

. . .

Outside, he went to work on the ground.

He did not walk on it. He worked around it on his knees, face low, and read. His father had taught him to read tracks since he was small. First somewhere else, in another forest that Adam remembered only in scraps, and for the last fourteen years on this clearing. And this clearing was saying more now than it had ever said.

They had come from the north, along the path. Meaning the one worn smooth for them. They had reached the blind ravine and turned. Here was a print, a heel, deep, someone stopping and looking around. Then they had gone up through the trees, just as Adam did, only louder. Branches snapped at shoulder height. At the height of *their* shoulders.

His father had heard them. He must have. He had have heard them a kilometer off.

And he had not run.

Adam turned it over in his head while he followed the tracks further, and he could not make it sit anywhere. His father knew what to do when they came. They both knew. There was a plan, plain and old: vanish, down the stream, downhill, never up, meet at the third waterfall. Never fight

until fighting is necessary. His father had said it so many times it had become almost a joke.

And then there were three bodies and torn ground.

He had fought. Here, in the yard, against three. Adam could see where: he could see the print where his father had stood when the first of them came onto the clearing, by the drying rack, side-on, so the sun was behind him, the way he taught it. He could see where he took his first step. Not back, forward, long, heavy, the step Adam knew from a thousand training bouts, the one that always meant it was over even if the other man was still standing. He looked at the dent in the first dead man's chest and knew whose hand had made it.

He took the second with a knife? No, the knives were in the hut. With something he took off the first. Not a weapon. His father never used their weapons when he didn't have to; *a weapon you don't know is a weapon that doesn't know you*. He took something else. Adam went over the first body again and found it: an empty sheath on the belt, long and narrow, for a blade that wasn't there. It wasn't anywhere.

His father took it with him. Or they took it.

The third one ran. That much could be believed. The third was young and the other two were down and he turned and ran for the edge of the clearing and did not make it.

And then?

Then there was the trough. Long, deep, bowed, right across the middle of the yard. Adam knelt beside it and

slowly, very slowly, understood what it meant. Something heavy had gone down here. Not a dead man, the dead lay elsewhere. Something that fell and then slid sideways, the way a man slides when he is still driving with his legs.

At the end of the trough there was blood.

Not much. Not a pool. A stain the size of a palm, soaked into the dirt, and beyond it three drops, each a step further, heading for the path.

Adam laid his hand on the stain. It was dry. And it was darker than human blood should be, and thicker, and it had the same metallic undertone as the lining of the helmet.

Father's.

But his father was not lying here.

. . .

There had been more than three. That was obvious before he had finished counting. Three dead, but tracks for five, maybe six. Heavy, deep, paired. And the outgoing tracks were different. They led back to the path and they were deeper than the incoming ones, and they ran closer together, and between them was a dragging, broken groove of the kind a heel makes when someone hauls it.

They were carrying someone off. Not carrying. Hauling, arms over the shoulders of two men, and that someone was not walking.

You do not haul the dead. The dead are either left where they lie or carried, and these three were left, because the ones who went had no time or no hands or

both. If his father had died, they had have left him here beside their own. Dead weight. Pointless risk in a forest where they had just lost three men.

They hauled him because he was alive.

Adam got to his feet. His knees did not obey the way they should. Not because of the rings, he was used to those, but because of something else spreading from his stomach into his thighs that had no name. He stood over the track and looked where it led. The path. The ravine. North. And beyond the north, two days away, the edge of the forest, and beyond the edge of the forest the world he knew only from his father's sentences.

He is alive.

He had not finished the thought and already the rope was in his hand and his foot was on the path.

They had been here in the morning, noon at the latest. Five hours' head start, six at most, with a wounded man they were dragging, on a path he knew with his eyes shut. He could catch them by dawn. They were moving loudly. There were three, no, two or three, with three lying here, and he would hear them long before they saw him, and at night, in the forest, on this terrain...

Never chase an enemy until you know where he's leading you.

He stopped with his second foot in the air, exactly as on the ridge when the birds were silent.

His father had said it many times. But what Adam heard now was one particular day, one particular tone. He had been fifteen and he was tracking a boar he'd wounded,

and the boar had led him over the ridge onto a slope where a second one was waiting, and Adam came back with his calf laid open and his father stitched him without a single word and only when he'd tied off the last knot did he say it. Calmly. Without reproach. *The animal led you to where it was stronger. A man will do the same. Always. Never chase an enemy until you know where he's leading you and what's waiting for you there.*

Two or three men. A wounded man being dragged. Along the path. At night.

And at the end of the path, two days from here, the edge of the forest, where what was waiting for him was what? How many? His father had talked about cities. About garrisons. About what the Vaelyari do to those who kill three of their soldiers. Adam knew all of it the way a man knows things from sentences. He did not know how it looked. He did not know how it sounded. He did not know whether those two were hauling his father to a garrison of twenty men or two hundred, or whether something was waiting at the forest's edge that he would hear about, at night, only at the moment when it was too late.

And if he did catch them, two, three, with his father between them like a shield...

He put his foot down slowly. He slung the rope back over his shoulder.

He stood there and hated it. He hated every second he stood. The anger was in him whole, finished, waiting only for him to let it go. Anger at the three lying there who could not be blamed for anything any more, anger at the

two on the path, anger at his father for fighting when he should have vanished, anger at himself for being three days on the ridge because his father had sent him there.

Anger was not a plan.

He turned back to the clearing.

. . .

He worked quickly, because the light was going, and carefully, because he could not do it any other way.

The weapons first. He drew all three pistols from their holsters and laid them on the table in the hut, side by side, and looked at them for a long time. They were heavy, dark, with no smooth place anywhere on them, the grip too wide for his hand. He had never held one. His father had spoken about them but had never kept one here. *When you need one of their weapons, you'll take it off one of them.* Now three of them lay there and he didn't know how they were made safe. He left them lying. A weapon you don't know.

Then the armor.

He knelt beside the first and went over him the way he went over everything, head to heel, slowly, skipping nothing. Helmet, if he had one. Collar. Shoulders, plates, joints. Belt. Thighs, knees, boots. He was looking for anything that had a shape. Anything that was the same on all three and at the same time was not only armor.

He found it on the collar. Left, under the collarbone, a small rectangular tab of darker metal, sunk into the plate so that it barely stood proud. There was a mark etched

into it. Not writing, not the writing his father had taught him to read off worn tablets; a shape. Two lines, broken, and between them something like a point. Below the shape, a row of small notches.

The second soldier had the same tab. The same shape. Different notches.

The third as well.

Adam had no idea what they meant. His father had taught him the marks of the houses, the great ones, the ones painted onto gates and tattooed onto necks. This was none of them. This was smaller. A unit. A squad. A number. Something that said *where from* and *whose*, if a man knew how to read it.

He did not. But somebody did.

He took the knife from the hut and prised out the first tab. It went badly; the metal was set deep and the plate around it was harder than anything he had ever cut. When he got it out, the back of it was rough and had two small prongs that had held it in the armor. He laid it on his palm. It weighed almost nothing.

He prised out the second. The third.

Then he knelt beside the first again, because he remembered his father talking about the gauntlets, that the same thing was on the back of the hand, only smaller, in case the collar burned. It was there. Tiny, barely visible, the same broken shape. He left it. Three were enough.

One more thing. He rolled the first body onto its side and stripped the empty blade sheath off its belt. Long, narrow, the same matt material as the armor. Empty. He

pushed it through his own belt. If that blade was anywhere, it was with his father, and he would want to know it when he saw it.

Water last. Each of them had a flat vessel on his belt, and Adam unclipped two and poured them into his own leather flask. It tasted of metal. It tasted of them.

. . .

When he had finished, the sun was sitting on the ridge he had come down from that morning, no, three days ago, and long shadows of posts and bodies stretched across the clearing. The burned metal behind the hut had stopped smoking. Now, with time to look, he could see what it had been: something with legs and a flat back, the size of a dog, melted into itself. A machine. His father had spoken of such things, that they walk ahead of patrols, that they see in the dark, that they feel heat. This one had ended in fire and Adam decided not to find out how. His father wouldn't have explained it. His father would have said: *Find out what you need. Not what you want.*

He stood at the edge of the clearing with three tabs in his pocket and an empty sheath through his belt and looked at the three dead men he had left lying where they lay.

They'd come for them. He knew that without his father's sentences. They'd come for their dead, because they always do, his father had said so, *they don't leave their dead*, and these three were lying here only because the ones who left had no hands to spare. They'd be back. To-

morrow, the day after, with others. And they'd find the clearing, and the hut, and the torn ground.

And the tracks of someone who had been here after them.

He looked at his own prints in the dirt. They were everywhere. Smaller than theirs. Different boots. Different weight.

He had to be gone by morning. He had to take out of here everything that was his and leave the clearing telling the story of one man who had fought alone and lost alone. He had to...

Had to snapped inside him and he sat down. Right there, on the edge of the clearing, in the dirt, his back against the fallen trunk. Legs out. Hands in his lap. The rings on his wrists caught the dark dully, like wet stones.

Three days. He'd been three days on the ridge, because his father sent him there. *Go. Take rope and little food. Come back when you can climb the Tooth without rope.* He'd climbed the Tooth without rope on the second morning and then stayed another day, because he wanted it to be a real ascent and not a fluke, and climbed it again, and again, and then came back slowly, satisfied, his palms raw, and the whole time, here...

He closed his eyes.

He saw his father's hand. Large, dark, with an old scarred knuckle on the ring finger. Bending over his wrist when he was twelve and turning a ring a fraction, the smallest fraction, and whispering something to it that Adam didn't understand. Several long words in the old

language, quietly, the way one speaks to someone who's asleep. And the ring grew heavier. Not by much. Just enough to feel, and his father straightened up and said: *Again*. And Adam began again.

Again.

He opened his eyes.

In the dark between the trees he could see nothing, but he knew where north was. He knew where the path was. He knew where those tracks led: into the ravine, up out of the blind ravine, along the spine, down to the river, north along the river, two days, three with a wounded man. To the edge of the forest. To the places he knew only as much about as fits into sentences: *not there, never there, that's where they are.*

All his life it had been the edge of the world. Forest here, them out there.

His father was out there.

Adam sat in the dirt with his back against the trunk and three pieces of metal weighing on his pocket that weighed almost nothing. Somebody at the edge of the forest could read them. Somebody knew what that broken shape meant, and knew where a squad like that takes a wounded Vaelyar found alone in the jungle with two knives on a hook and an open door.

He was not dead. They had taken him alive. And the tracks led out of the only world Adam had ever known.

He stood.

The night would be for making the clearing forget he had ever lived there. The morning would already be on the road.

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MARTIN HESOUN · VAELYARI