NOMAD
Origin Story

He tightened the dark yellow veil covering everything but the mask resting above his eyes. Turning to the rider beside him, he spoke sharply:

"Erka! Tell the ones behind us to prepare for the storm ahead!"

Before the last syllable left his mouth, Erka wheeled his horse around and galloped toward the large group trailing two minutes behind.

Karaman was the brother of the man who led more than five hundred souls of their wandering people. To ensure nothing befell their bloodline, he always rode at the front, meeting every danger before anyone else. Standing ahead of his elder brother and the families he protected had always filled him with pride. Many challenges had risen in their path, and Karaman had been the first to face every one of them.

But today, the growing cloud of dust before them clawed unease into his chest. He glanced at the other outriders. The worry in their eyes was unmistakable. They had weathered countless storms before, but none had ever risen so high into the heavens. It was as if the sands were not blown up from the earth, but hurled into the heart of the storm.

The young rider's dark eyes widened the moment he saw the black void inside the swirling sands. This storm devoured everything in its path. Lightning flashed within it, striking with a speed none of them had ever witnessed. And yet not a single breeze touched their faces.

"Back to the caravans!" he suddenly roared.

Karaman stroked his horse's neck with one hand and tugged the reins with the other, turning her toward the caravan. As he leaned forward, the mare understood instantly and lunged into a full gallop. The outriders behind him, slower to react, pushed their mounts to follow.

"Come on, Alma..."

The leader of the scouts murmured to his horse as she tore through the brittle, yellowing grasses, racing toward the caravan. Erka who had reached the group moments earlier had already dismounted the people, urging them to dig into the earth as they always did during sandstorms, preparing a makeshift shelter. But as Karaman thundered toward his people, he realized too late that he had made the wrong choice.

The caravan should not stop. They should flee.

He did not know what was coming, but he had no desire to learn.

"Aka! Akaaa! Gather everyone!" he shouted to his brother, though he doubted the windless air would carry his voice.

He had not ridden so fast in years not since the days when the rush brought tears to his eyes. He felt Alma's chest rising and falling fiercely between his legs, the rapid huffing in her breath echoing his own fear. The mare sensed her rider's terror for the first time, and with him had become a single desperate body racing toward the people they had sworn to protect.

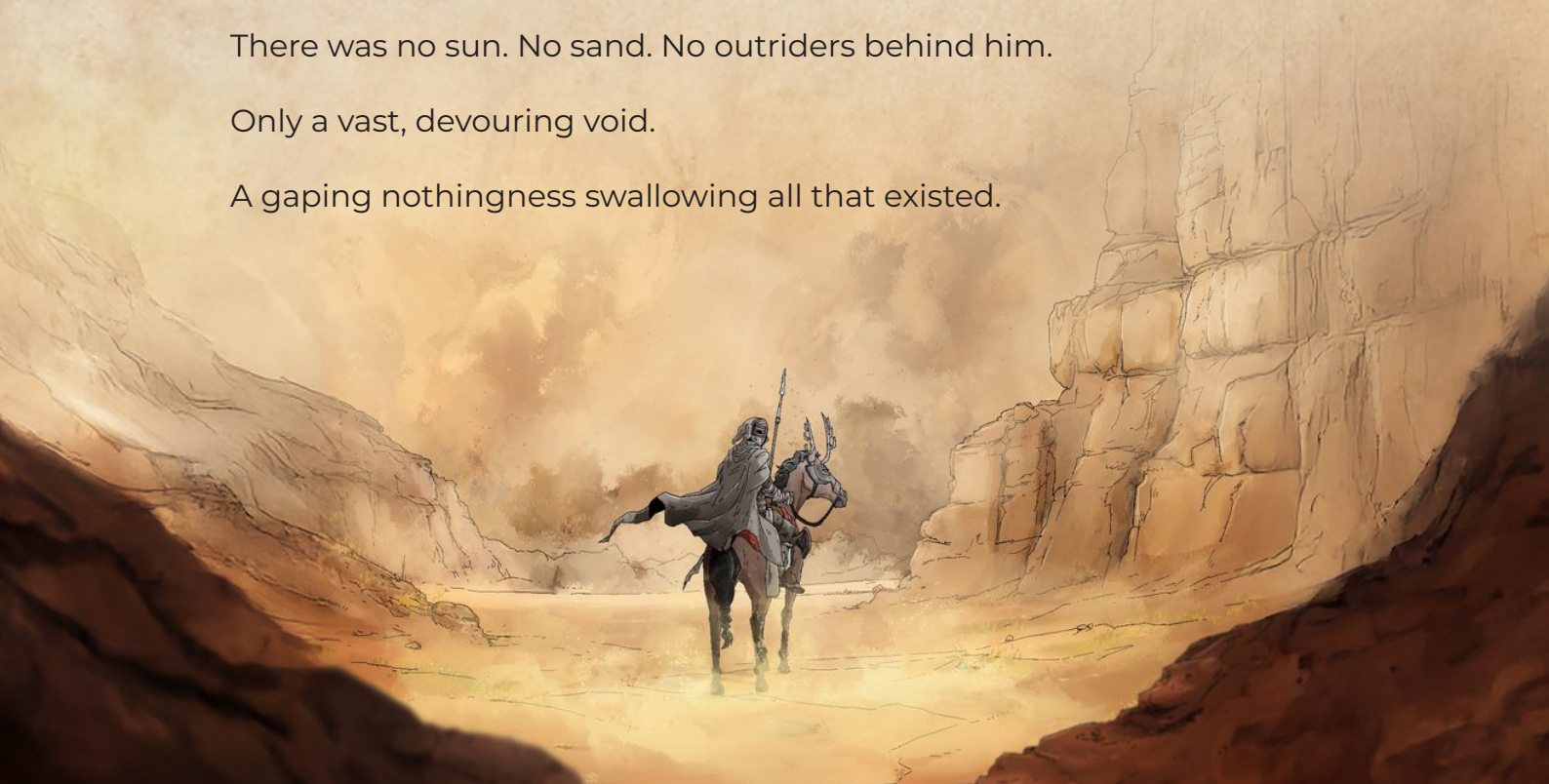
Then everything slowed.

Karaman saw his brother. Saw him staring, frozen, past the lookout's shoulder. A woman holding her newborn nearly dropped the child from her arms. Racing toward the caravan, Karaman made the one mistake he should never have made... He looked back.

There was no sun. No sand. No outriders behind him.

Only a vast, devouring void.

A gaping nothingness swallowing all that existed.



Karaman pressed himself closer to Alma, seeking refuge from the cold that seeped into his bones. She, too, was unused to such a frost, and he rested against her body so they could share whatever warmth remained.

One day earlier, they had been under the blazing sun of the plains, fighting to survive the storm. But the entire tribe had been consumed by darkness—and when they awoke, they found themselves atop a snow-covered mountain. Aka, though baffled, immediately counted the people.

Everyone was present. Even the animals were accounted for. Their supplies and provisions were untouched. Only the place had changed...

Karaman's brother, a seasoned leader, quickly assembled the tribe and sent scouts in all directions to find their bearings. With little firewood in the barren heights, they burned the thick trunks of the sparse dwarf-trees they used as sled runners and melted their stored animal fat for fuel. Great fires were erected, and the tribe gathered around them.

Knowing the camp would be safe for a short while, Karaman took to the western slopes in search of a path. Now, again, he found himself at the edge of an unforgiving cliff staring down into the unknown. Together, he and Alma looked over the strange land.

They had to escape the cold. Far below, Karaman had spotted a patch of forest and beyond that, endless steppes. But still no path led downward. They had encountered no creatures but a few odd insects. No mountain goats, no wolves, no familiar predators or prey.

Even the skies were empty; no eagles, no hawks, no a single bird.

If the cold did not kill them on these peaks, hunger surely would. He stroked Alma's neck.

"We must turn back. We're not getting down this way," he murmured with a weary smile.

His boots wrapped in hide and lined with wolf fur sank deep into the snow as he walked beside his horse, gripping her reins to steady himself. He did not know how to fight the rising despair within him. They did not know where they were. They faced a cold harsher than anything they had endured. And worst of all, if no food could be found, starvation would be the end of them.

As they made their way eastward, Karaman stepped on a hollow patch of snow. The ground gave way and he slipped toward the jagged cliffs. But Alma reared two steps upward, turning her head toward the mountain peak and tightening the tension on the reins. The sudden leverage prevented his leg from smashing into the rocks and allowed him to anchor his other foot against the slope.

Alma had saved him again just as she had many times before, charging through bandit raids with unmatched speed and courage. When he found steady ground, Karaman wrapped his arms around her neck

"Thank you, Alma... once more," he whispered, pressing his forehead to hers.

As the sun was setting while its warmth was fading quickly, they finally returned to the camp. A meal was ready. The animals were fed. Before resting, Karaman sought out his brother to learn whether any other scouts had returned.

"Tara has not come back," Aka said grimly. *"I sent her down the southern side."*

"I'll go look for her."

"No, kangdaş. Night is too dangerous. There is no moon!"

Karaman lifted his gaze to the sky so familiar, yet utterly strange. Was it the cold that made him shudder... or the realization that even the moon itself was missing from this unfamiliar sky?

"Then at least let me set a fire lower down the mountain. She won't find the camp in this darkness."

Aka nodded, placing a firm hand on his brother's shoulder.

"Be careful, kangdaş."

Karaman gathered scraps of cloth, fat, and wood from the camp and descended nearly a hundred and fifty paces down the mountain's flank. Every step was cautious. If he slipped like earlier, Alma would not be there to save him. He carved out a hollow in the hardened snow, a shelter for the fire to burn long and bright through the night. Once satisfied, he lit it. Flames leapt high and illuminated the frozen air around him.

He would wait here for Tara until dawn. A noble scout like her deserved at least that much. In this uncharted darkness, he knew that going further would only doom him as well.

Waiting did not suit a man like Karaman, but he had no choice. Sitting a short distance from the blaze, he stared down at the dimly lit plain below.

Then he saw it. A glimmer. Then another. And another.

Tiny sparks of orange, unmistakably fire, flickered at the edge and center of the strange forest he had seen earlier. He stepped away from his campfire for a better look. One of the lights flashed several times before disappearing.

“By the gods... those are flames!”

His sense of lostness vanished, replaced by a sudden, fierce hope. And with it, a creeping dread. Who were they?

By morning, the choice he made would shape the fate of the entire tribe. He simply did not know it yet.