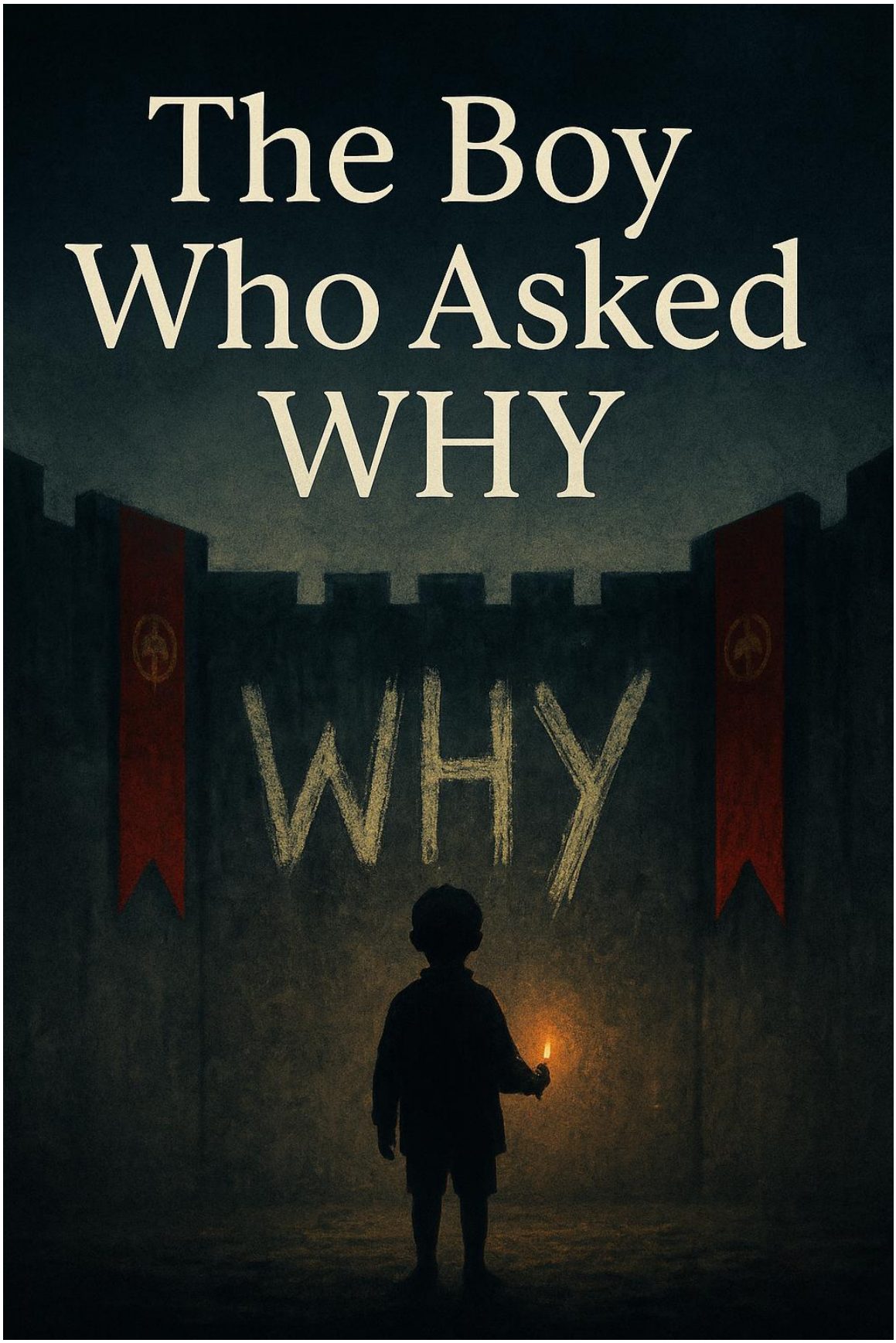
The Boy
Who Asked
WHY
WHY

The Boy Who Asked Why

Written with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence

2025

Preface

Every empire begins with an answer.

A declaration, a slogan, a certainty carved into stone and repeated until the tongue forgets it has other shapes. The answer promises safety, order, peace. But behind every absolute answer hides the same question, trembling and persistent: why?

History does not belong only to kings and generals. It also belongs to children who dared to notice that something was wrong. A question asked in innocence is more dangerous than a weapon, because it forces truth into the light.

This is not a story of war, though there will be battles. It is not a story of politics, though governments will rise and fall. This is the story of a boy, small and unremarkable in every way, except for one gift: he was not afraid to ask why.

And sometimes, that is enough to unmake an empire.

Prologue

The city of **Veyronis** lay draped in banners of red and gold, its towers gleaming like blades held against the sky. The people called it *the Heart of Order*. The rulers called it *eternal*. Children called it home.

For eleven years, so did **Arel**.

His world was small: the park at the end of the street, where the grass was trimmed by unseen hands; the fountain that sprayed water in perfect arcs; the laughter of other children chasing each other beneath the statues of soldiers. He held his mother's hand as they walked together, his father beside them, and for a while the world was simple.

Arel's father worked in logistics, moving crates marked with the seal of the Empire: a crown pierced by a sword. His mother worked in administration, counting numbers that always had to match. They were good citizens, the kind the Empire trusted. They smiled when they passed the loudspeakers that played the Anthem of Order. They bowed their heads when the High Chancellor's portrait appeared on the screens.

Arel never noticed the way their smiles tightened, the way their heads bowed too quickly. He only noticed the sound of birds in the morning, the way the sun turned windows to gold, the feel of his mother's fingers brushing his hair.

It was a beautiful life. But beauty in Veyronis was never without shadow.

It began with whispers he could not name.

Sometimes, in the park, he would hear adults lower their voices when soldiers walked by. He would see neighbors glance over their shoulders before speaking. And once, when he asked his mother why a family from across the street had left overnight, she pressed her lips together so hard that her answer disappeared.

"People move," she said. "Don't ask."

But Arel's mind did not know how to stop asking.

One evening, as the sun bled across the rooftops, he sat at the table with his parents. His father's hands trembled as he set down his cup, though he smiled to hide it. On the screen, the Chancellor's voice declared, *"Order is freedom. Obedience is peace."*

Arel tilted his head. "Father," he asked, "if obedience is peace, why do the soldiers carry guns?"

The question fell into the room like a stone into water. His father's smile froze. His mother's spoon clattered. For a moment, the only sound was the Anthem still playing from the broadcast, its notes too perfect, too clean.

"Eat your bread," his father said gently. But his voice shook.

And in that tremor, the question lingered.

That night, as Arel lay in bed, he heard his parents speaking in the kitchen, their voices hushed, urgent. He caught only fragments: *dangerous… curious… he must learn silence.*

But Arel did not know how to learn silence. He only knew that the world was filled with things that did not match, and he wanted to understand.

The stars outside flickered like answers not yet spoken. He whispered to himself, as if making a promise:

"Tomorrow I will ask again."

And far above the city, where banners of red and gold rippled in the wind, the Empire of Order shivered—though it did not yet know why.

Chapter 1 – The Beautiful Beginning

Morning arrived in Veyronis like a ceremony that never tired of itself.

The blinds in Arel's room slid open at the same angle every day; the radio in the kitchen woke with three soft chimes and a warm male voice that said, "Good dawn, citizens," as if the sun itself had filed a report. From the window, the red-and-gold banners along the avenue lifted in the breeze and settled again, the city breathing through cloth.

Arel was eleven and believed mornings were treasures you had to spend quickly. He leapt from the bed before the third chime ended, pressed his nose to the glass, and counted birds on the wires—one, two, four, five—skipping three because skipping made the day feel like it might surprise him. He named them under his breath. "Courier. Trumpeter. Sleeper. Brave." He did not know their real species. He did not need to. Naming was a way of making room for things.

His mother set out bread and honey. His father poured tea as if pouring was a profession. The screen above the stove showed the High Chancellor's portrait for exactly ten seconds, then dissolved into the weather—sunny, compliant—then into a map with arrows: supply lines his father's department would make real with crates and numbers. The Anthem of Order began, the strings bright and tidy. They all stood, because standing was a habit, the way breathing is. Arel placed his hand over his heart as he had been taught, and for two stanzas he did not think of anything but the way music makes even walls feel proud.

"Eat," his mother said when the anthem finished, ruffling his hair in the same motion each day. She smelled like soap and starch. His father's shirt smelled faintly of oil and paper. Arel loved both smells because they meant his parents belonged to a world that worked.

"What is 'logistics' again?" he asked between bites.

His father smiled, softening. "It is making sure things arrive where they are needed, when they are needed."

"So you carry the city's hands," Arel said, pleased with himself.

His father laughed—short, real. "Something like that."

"And I carry the city's numbers," his mother added. "So the hands don't forget what they promised."

"It sounds like the city would fall apart without us," Arel said.

"It wouldn't," his father replied, but he didn't say why, and his eyes flicked—just once—to the window where a patrol passed, boots quiet, faces unreadable.

They left the apartment together, as they always did. The corridor smelled faintly of disinfectant and warm bread from the communal oven three floors below. On the landing, Mrs. Rima from 4B fed crumbs to a gray pigeon through the stairwell window, muttering to it like an old friend. She tucked the bag fast when the elevator dinged and smiled too widely when the doors opened. “Good dawn,” she said. “Look at our lucky sky!”

Arel beamed back. “Look! Brave is back.” He pointed to the wire. The pigeon tilted its head as if honored by the promotion.

“Lucky sky,” his mother echoed, and the elevator took them down.

They walked Arel to the park at the end of the street before they split for work. The grass there was trimmed by a machine that hummed somewhere you couldn’t see. Children ran beneath the statue of the Founding Sword: a man cast in bronze, arm lifted, blade pointing toward a future no one in the park could visit yet. Somewhere inside the pedestal, a speaker played a faint loop: Order is love in public.

Arel and his friend Leio ran to the fountain, counted the jets, and tried to guess which stream would jump first when the hidden clock clicked. “The third,” Arel said, and Leio said, “The fifth,” and they were both wrong, which made it intensely satisfying.

Arel’s mother kissed his forehead. “At noon, the bread cart. At four, the benches. At five, home.”

“Home,” he repeated, because he liked the word. His father squeezed his shoulder and said, “Ask good questions,” as a joke, and his mother said, “Don’t trouble people,” not as a joke, and both sentences made a small knot in Arel’s chest that he didn’t know how to untie.

He and Leio built an empire of twigs and leaves near the bench where the old men argued about chess without a board. “This is the Grain House,” Arel said. “And this is the River Gate. Whoever crosses here has to pay two acorns.”

“What if they don’t have acorns?” Leio asked.

“Then they have to sing,” Arel decided.

“Order is love in public,” one of the old men said to the other, as if quoting a proverb to win a point. “Private love is a luxury.”

“Private love keeps a house warm,” the other replied, which sounded like a wrong answer, and both of them watched the patrol pass and changed the subject.

At school the bell rang exactly when it should. The principal’s voice came over the intercom—warm, practiced, kind. “Good dawn, students. Remember, clarity is kindness.” The class

stood and recited the Pledge, and Arel spoke the words he had learned before he could tie his shoes: “I give my voice to the peace of Veyronis. I give my hands to its order. I give my days to its future.” The teacher, Mr. Avas, wore a small pin shaped like the Chancellor’s silhouette, neat as a comma on his collar.

During copywork, Arel’s pencil wandered. He wrote the capital V of Veyronis and then, without meaning to, drew a question mark next to it. He colored it in until it looked like a tiny bird.

At recess he traded half his bread for a marble with a green swirl inside. The boy who sold it called it a “dragon eye.” Arel held it up to the sun and watched the park bend and bend again. The marble made the statue look small; it made the soldiers look like toys; it made everybody’s faces strange and beautiful. He decided he loved the marble the way he loved names.

On the way back to class, he asked the janitor, who was erasing chalk from the hallway boards, “Why do the soldiers carry guns if the city is safe?”

The janitor’s eraser paused mid-stroke. A smear of white hung there like a cloud that had forgotten where it was going. He looked down the hall, then at Arel, and his face did something complicated. “Because,” he said slowly, “sometimes safety is a costume that needs a sword to keep it from slipping.”

Arel considered this. “Is the sword heavy?”

“It should be,” the janitor said. “If it isn’t, that means someone else is carrying the weight for you.”

Mr. Avas opened the classroom door with a smile that had been ironed. “Inside, Arel. Big thoughts after arithmetic.”

The day continued as days do when they are told to behave: lunch at twelve, handwriting at one, civics at two. In civics, Miss Droya showed them a poster of the Chancellor visiting a factory—men and women lined perfectly, teeth perfectly visible. “This is what gratitude looks like,” she said. “Gratitude is the twin of order.”

Arel raised his hand. “What is the twin of freedom?”

The classroom went quiet. Miss Droya’s smile did not change, but her fingers tightened on the pointer. “Responsibility,” she said swiftly. “Write it down.”

Arel wrote responsibility. Next to it, small, he wrote why.

After school, he met his mother at the benches at four, as arranged. The sun had softened, the statue's shadow stretched long over the path like a scarf someone had dropped. His mother's jaw was tighter than the morning's. "We will take the long way," she said.

"I like long ways," Arel said, hopping from shadow to shadow, careful not to touch the gold stripes painted on the pavement. The gold stripes were for parades. They were empty now, bright and waiting.

They passed a kiosk that sold paper flags and boiled peanuts. The vendor's radio murmured: "Everything for peace, everything for order." Arel tilted his head. "Mama, is order the same as peace?"

"Order helps peace," she said.

"What helps order?"

She hesitated. "Good questions. And good silences."

"What is a good silence?"

"The kind that keeps things from breaking."

"What happens if things need to break?"

They had reached the end of the gold-painted parade lane. A soldier at the corner looked at them without looking at them. "We don't talk about that," she said softly, and tucked a loose strand of hair behind his ear as if such touches were still allowed.

In the evening they went to the park again, because routine was a kind of love even the Empire encouraged. A man flew a kite shaped like a hawk. The string sang in the wind. A small girl clapped. The hawk's shadow slid over the red-and-gold banner on the avenue and for one second the colors went dark. Arel felt something in his chest—like the knot from the morning, but sharper, brighter, almost a flame.

He looked up at his father. "If obedience is peace," he began, remembering last night's question, "then—"

"Not now," his father said quickly, then added, softer, "Later. Ask me later."

Arel swallowed the question the way you swallow a cherry pit—aware that it might plant itself somewhere you can't reach. He rolled the marble in his pocket instead and watched the world bend again.

On the walk home they passed Mrs. Rima from 4B closing her door. She carried a small bag close to her chest, as if it contained something that could run away. "Lucky sky," she said in

a whisper, and the whisper itself sounded like it could be broken if someone breathed on it too hard.

That night at dinner the screen showed a short report about “economic adjustments.” A map flashed red in a district not far from theirs. “A minor correction,” the announcer said cheerfully. “Order maintained.” Arel looked to his parents for translation and received two new versions of the same smile—his mother’s brittle, his father’s brave.

“Tomorrow,” his father said, “let’s go to the old part of the park. The one with the willow. They haven’t replaced it yet.”

“Replaced it with what?”

“With the right kind of tree,” his mother said, and laughed, and the laugh sounded like someone tapping a glass to see if it would crack.

When Arel lay in bed, the city hummed, faithful as a refrigerator. He lined his new marble and three others along the windowsill, small planets orbiting whatever Veyronis wanted them to orbit. In the alley, a cat knocked something over and fled. On the avenue, the loudspeaker whispered a late version of the Anthem, strings softer, almost kind.

He whispered to the dark as if practicing. “Why do soldiers carry guns if peace is complete?”

He whispered again, a different shape. “Why do we stand when the song tells us to sit?”

He whispered a third time, and the question surprised him: “Why do I feel heavy when the city says I am safe?”

The questions lined up beside the marbles, catching light from nowhere, a constellation without a map.

In the room beyond the wall, his parents spoke quietly.

“He’s only a child,” his mother said.

“That’s what frightens me,” his father answered.

Arel did not hear the words, only the weight hidden inside them. He placed the marble over his heart, a cool promise. He fell asleep with his palm open, as if holding a question that had decided to grow fingers of its own.

Outside, the banners lifted and settled again. Somewhere, a man in a booth turned a dial. Somewhere else, a woman in an office counted numbers until they matched. In a glass building, a soldier hung his uniform on a chair and stood for a long time in the doorway before

remembering how to sit. In the park, the statue’s shadow stretched across the gold lines and made a quiet road nobody had painted.

Morning was already getting ready to arrive on time.

And the beautiful beginning, which had been beautiful, began to learn how to carry its first hairline crack.

Chapter II — The Empire of Order

The Empire of Order taught its children that order was a kind of love. The posters said so, the teachers repeated it, and the loudspeakers hummed it into every corner where silence might grow suspicious.

Order was red and gold. It was the banners that hung across avenues, catching sunlight like fire. It was the statues, everyone a soldier, every soldier gazing forward as if they saw a horizon ordinary citizens were forbidden to imagine. Order was the Anthem that opened every day and closed every evening, making sure no hour ended without permission.

To Arel, order was simply the backdrop of life—the steady beat behind the melody of his days. He knew the slogans before he could spell his own name. *Obedience is peace. Obedience is love in public. The Chancellor is the father of fathers, the mother of mothers.*

The words sounded true, because everyone said them.

At school, Miss Droya pinned a new poster to the classroom wall: the Chancellor, hand raised, smiling as children saluted him with perfect arms. Beneath it, the caption: *"Every child is a seed of loyalty."*

"Copy it down," she instructed. "Repetition makes truth steady."

Arel's friend Leio whispered while his pencil scratched: "Why do they always make him taller in the pictures?"

Arel shrugged. "Maybe he is taller."

Miss Droya glanced at them sharply. The room froze. For one long moment, Arel felt the silence press against his ribs. Then the teacher smiled again, too quickly. "Work neatly," she said. "Neatness is respect."

The air exhaled. Pencils moved again. But Arel noticed that Leio's hand shook slightly, and when the bell rang, he avoided looking at the poster.

On Fridays, the city held the **Procession of Peace**. Families gathered on the gold-painted avenue, children lined neatly in front. Music swelled from hidden speakers, a triumphal march that made the air itself seem obedient. Soldiers strode past in perfect rows, boots striking the ground as if measuring it into submission.

Arel loved the rhythm, the glitter of bayonets, the banners rippling like wings. He clapped with the other children, his heart racing. His mother smiled tightly, applauding with careful palms. His father's eyes flicked from the soldiers to the crowd, scanning, weighing.

The High Chancellor appeared at the end of the procession, standing in a black car polished so bright it reflected the sky. He waved. The crowd waved back in unison, as if they were one body with many arms.

Arel waved too, with both hands. But as he looked around, he saw something strange: smiles that did not reach eyes, cheers that broke too quickly, people clapping while their jaws clenched. For the first time, he wondered if order was not love at all, but something heavier.

That evening, he asked his father, “Why does everyone cheer if they don’t want to?”

His father stiffened. “What makes you think they don’t want to?”

“Their eyes,” Arel said simply. “Eyes tell the truth.”

His mother pressed her lips together. His father reached across the table and squeezed his son’s hand hard enough to hurt. “Some truths,” he said, voice low, “are too heavy for a boy to carry. Let the Empire carry them.”

“But—”

“Eat your bread,” his mother cut in. Her smile was sweet, but her fingers trembled on the spoon.

Arel swallowed his question. But in his chest, it grew sharper, like a seed that refused to die.

At night, the city glowed. Towers lit in gold shimmered against the black sky, while drones traced patterns above the avenues. The loudspeakers played the Anthem softly, like a lullaby, telling citizens that sleep itself was obedience.

Arel lay in bed, the marble with the green swirl in his hand. He whispered to it as if it could keep secrets:

“Why does truth have to be heavy?”

No one answered. But he thought, just for a moment, that the marble pulsed with light, as if it knew something it wasn’t ready to tell him.

The Empire of Order was vast, its power absolute. But that night, in one small room of one small apartment, a boy’s question lingered in the dark. And empires, no matter how mighty, have always feared questions more than swords.

Chapter III — The Questions Begin

The first time Arel realized his words could change a room, he was not trying to. He was only asking.

It happened on a Sunday morning when the park was busiest. Families spread blankets beneath the bronze soldiers, vendors sold roasted nuts wrapped in paper cones, and children kicked balls that always seemed to avoid statues as if warned by instinct.

Arel and Leio played by the fountain, tossing his green-swirled marble back and forth. When it slipped and rolled toward a group of adults on a bench, Arel chased it. The marble stopped at the foot of Mr. Daren, the baker, who picked it up and handed it back with a smile that didn't quite fit his face.

"Thank you, sir," Arel said brightly. Then, without thinking, he asked:
"Why don't you smile with your eyes?"

The adults around the bench went still. The baker's smile faltered. For a moment, his gaze dropped to the ground as if searching for an answer buried in the stones.

"I... I am tired," he muttered at last.

"But you laughed yesterday," Arel said. "You laughed at the pigeons. You had the same eyes then. They looked different."

A woman nearby drew in a sharp breath. She looked around as though soldiers might already be listening. "Hush, boy," she whispered.

But it was too late. Something had cracked in the air.

Mr. Daren cleared his throat. "Sometimes," he said, voice low, "we smile so that others can see we are good citizens."

"But what if you're sad?" Arel asked, tilting his head.

"Then we smile harder," the baker answered, and the words hung heavy.

Arel blinked. "That doesn't make sense."

The group exchanged nervous glances. Someone hissed, "Quiet!" Another muttered, "It's only a child." But in their silence, Arel felt it: the truth had brushed against them, and it had left a mark.

Later that week, Arel walked home with his mother through the marketplace. Stalls of bright fruit, polished vegetables, and folded cloth lined the square. Loudspeakers above played cheerful announcements: *"Order keeps food on your table. Order keeps the sun rising."*

At a stall selling apples, Arel tugged on his mother's sleeve. "Why do all the apples look the same?"

The vendor's hand froze mid-gesture. His mother stiffened. "Because sameness means quality," she said quickly. "Don't ask such things."

"But trees don't make apples the same," Arel insisted. "They make them different." He turned to the vendor. "Where are the ugly ones?"

The man's face paled. His mother yanked his arm. "Enough!" she snapped, pushing coins into the vendor's hand. As they walked away, Arel looked back and saw the man's lips tremble into a shape he did not recognize—half fear, half longing.

The questions kept slipping out.

To the janitor at school: "Why do you erase words if we're supposed to remember them?" To a neighbor: "Why do you whisper when the anthem plays if it's such a good song?" To his teacher: "Why is the Chancellor always right if people make mistakes?"

Each time, the same reaction: a silence too sharp, a glance over the shoulder, a plea for quiet. Yet in that silence, something moved—like a shadow deciding to grow longer.

One evening, as the family ate stew, Arel asked his father, "Why did the family across the street leave at night? Where did they go?"

His father's spoon paused midair. His mother's eyes darkened.

"They were relocated," his father said. "For work."

"But their house is empty."

"For work far away."

Arel leaned forward. "Then why was there a soldier outside their door?"

The silence at the table was deeper than any anthem. His father set down his spoon carefully, as if the table might break under a sudden movement. "Arel," he said, "questions can be dangerous."

"Why?"

The word came so quickly it was almost part of the breath. His father closed his eyes. “Because they make people remember what they are told to forget.”

The next morning, soldiers appeared in the marketplace, more than usual. They stood at corners, hands on their rifles, eyes hidden by visors. Arel saw the way people stiffened, the way their voices thinned.

He turned to his mother. “Why are they here if nothing is wrong?”

She shushed him, her face pale. But the woman at the bread stall looked up suddenly, her lips parted as if she might answer. Then fear closed her mouth again.

That night, Arel overheard his parents.

“He’s only a boy,” his mother whispered. “He doesn’t know what he’s doing.”
“He’s doing too much,” his father muttered. “People listen. They *think*.”
“They’ll notice us. We’ll be called in.”
“We have to teach him silence.”

But silence was not something Arel could learn. To him, questions were as natural as breathing. And he could not understand why breathing should be punished.

In the days that followed, his questions spread like sparks. A neighbor repeated one to another—“The boy asked why all the apples look the same”—and laughter, nervous but real, followed. In the factory lines, someone whispered, “Why must obedience be peace?” and heads turned.

The questions were small, simple, innocent. Yet they carried weight, the way a pebble carries weight when it begins an avalanche.

And high above, in the towers of the Empire, men in dark coats began to take notice of whispers they could not control.

Whispers that began with a boy.
A boy who asked why.

Chapter IV — The Seed of Doubt

The summons arrived as a folded slip of paper beneath their door. On the front, in neat block letters, it read: **“Civic Courtesy Session. Attendance required.”**

Arel’s mother found it first. She held it with fingertips that trembled slightly, as though the paper carried heat. His father read it twice, jaw tight, before tucking it under a stack of bills on the counter.

“What is it?” Arel asked, looking up from his marbles.

“Nothing,” his mother said too quickly. “Just a conversation.”

But Arel had learned to listen not only to words but to eyes, and his parents’ eyes were not calm.

The **Office of Civic Courtesy** sat in a gray building with no windows. Its doors were polished steel, its lobby quiet enough to make footsteps feel like confessions. A mural of the Chancellor stretched across one wall: his hand raised, his eyes serene, his smile perfect. Beneath it, words carved into stone: *“Truth belongs to the loyal.”*

They sat in a waiting room lined with identical chairs. Other families sat there too—mothers gripping children’s shoulders, fathers looking at the floor, boys and girls shifting uncomfortably under the weight of silence. Arel swung his feet, watching the guards. Their faces were smooth, unreadable, as if carved from the same stone as the Chancellor’s mural.

A buzzer sounded. A guard gestured. “Family 27.”

That was them.

The chamber was not frightening at first. It was furnished like a classroom, with rows of chairs and a wide desk at the front. Behind the desk sat two men in gray coats. One smiled as they entered, but it was a smile that looked as though it had been practiced in a mirror.

“Welcome,” the first man said. “We are here to ensure harmony. Please sit.”

Arel’s parents sat stiffly. Arel sat too, clutching his marble in his pocket.

The second man opened a file. “Your son, Arel. Eleven years old. Bright. Energetic. Curious.” He looked up with a smile that did not touch his eyes. “Too curious, perhaps.”

Arel tilted his head. “How can someone be too curious?”

His mother inhaled sharply. His father’s hand closed over his knee, warning.

The first man chuckled softly. “Questions are good, little one. But too many questions can confuse others. Confusion makes disorder. Disorder makes unhappiness.”

“But questions also make truth,” Arel said before he could stop himself.

The man’s smile froze for a fraction of a second. Then he leaned forward. “Truth is what the Empire provides, child. Asking outside it is like wandering off the road. Do you want to get lost?”

“No,” Arel said. “But sometimes roads go the wrong way.”

The silence that followed was heavy enough to make even the guards shift their weight.

His father spoke quickly. “He’s a boy. He doesn’t understand.”

The second man closed the file. “That is why we invite families. To help children learn silence when silence is loyalty.”

He leaned toward Arel, voice gentle, almost kind. “Do you love your parents?”

“Yes,” Arel said.

“Then you must protect them. Your words are heavy, and they fall on their shoulders. Do you want to hurt them?”

Arel’s throat tightened. He looked at his mother, at his father. Their faces were pale, drawn. He shook his head. “No.”

“Good,” the man said. “Then learn this: loyalty is silence.”

They were dismissed with a warning: “Questions are not toys.”

On the way home, no one spoke. The streets were crowded, banners snapping in the wind, but the silence between them was louder than any anthem.

Finally, as they climbed the stairs to their apartment, Arel whispered, “I’m sorry.”

His mother knelt and gripped his shoulders. Her eyes glistened with something he had never seen in them before: fear mixed with love. “No, Arel,” she said softly. “Don’t be sorry. Just… be careful.”

His father spoke more harshly, though his voice cracked. “No more questions. Do you hear me? Not to neighbors, not to teachers, not to anyone.”

Arel nodded. But inside, the questions pressed harder, louder, like seeds splitting stone.

That night, lying awake, he remembered the man's words: *Loyalty is silence*.
He turned it over in his mind, testing it the way one tests a coin for weight.

If loyalty was silence, why did silence feel like a wound?
If truth belonged to the loyal, why did the truth hide when questions came?

He pressed the marble to his eye, watching the ceiling bend and swirl. He whispered to it as if it could answer.

"Why is silence heavier than words?"

And in the stillness of the night, he thought he heard the faintest reply—not from the marble, but from his own heart:

Because silence carries what no one dares to speak.

The next morning, the neighbors looked at them differently. Some smiled too broadly; others avoided their eyes. Mrs. Rima from 4B whispered, "Lucky sky," but her hands shook as she held the stairwell rail.

The seed of doubt had been planted. Not only in Arel, but in everyone who had heard whispers of a boy who asked questions too loudly.

And the Empire, though it had warned and threatened, had also made a mistake: it had given those whispers a stage.

Chapter V — The Crack in the Wall

It began with the sound of boots in the night.

Arel woke to the thud of doors below, the metallic click of rifles, and the sharp command of voices trying to whisper power. He crept to the window and pressed his cheek to the glass. Across the street, soldiers stood in a half-circle around the house of Mr. Daren, the baker. The same man who had once handed back Arel's marble with trembling hands.

Light flared as the door was forced open. Shadows moved inside. Mrs. Daren cried out, her voice muffled, cut short. Arel could not see what happened next, only the soldiers emerging with bundles, a cart waiting like a mouth to swallow them whole. The house stood emptied before the clock struck three.

When morning came, the windows of the Daren house were shuttered. The bread stall in the marketplace stood vacant, its sign already removed. No one spoke of it.

But Arel could not stop himself.

At breakfast, he asked, "Where did Mr. Daren go?"

His father froze. His mother dropped her spoon. "Eat," she said.

"But his house is empty. They took his things."

"Eat."

"Where did they take him?"

His father slammed a hand on the table, hard enough to make the cups rattle. "Enough!" His voice broke into two pieces, one angry, one afraid.

Arel's chest tightened. He whispered, "If it was nothing, why are you afraid?"

His father's hand trembled against the wood. His mother touched Arel's shoulder, her fingers ice-cold. "Please," she whispered. "Not here. Not now."

That day at school, the seat beside Leio was empty. Miss Droya announced with her usual smile, "Leio has been reassigned to a better district. We should all be proud."

But the class was silent. Arel looked at the empty desk, the pencil still lying there, the paper torn halfway through a drawing of a kite. He raised his hand.

"Where did he go?"

The teacher's smile faltered. "I told you. A better district."

“Which one?”

Her face stiffened. “Questions waste time. Loyalty saves it.”

“But who decides what’s better?”

The silence thickened. A few students looked down at their papers. One boy’s lips twitched, almost into a smile. A girl’s eyes widened as if she had remembered something she wasn’t supposed to.

“Enough!” Miss Droya snapped. “Write the anthem fifty times. That will teach you clarity.”

Arel bent his head. But as his pencil scratched across the page, he wrote the anthem once, and beside it, in small letters: *Why do friends disappear?*

In the marketplace, the whispers began.

Mrs. Rima from 4B leaned close when she thought no one was listening. “They came in the night, didn’t they?” she murmured.

Arel nodded.

“Lucky sky,” she said louder, glancing at the passing soldiers. Then, softer, “It is not lucky at all.”

A fruit seller added a bruised apple to Arel’s bag and whispered, “Careful, boy. Careful with your words. They are watching.”

But later, as Arel walked away, he heard the fruit seller mutter to another vendor: “The boy asked where the baker went. The boy is right.”

And the other replied, “I’ve asked myself the same.”

The words traveled like embers, carried on breath, hidden in sleeves.

One evening, in the park, Arel sat with his marble, holding it up to the statue of the Founding Sword. Through the green swirl, the sword bent, the soldier looked smaller, less certain. He turned to his mother.

“Why do soldiers take neighbors if we are all one family?”

She shut her eyes. Tears pressed against her lashes but did not fall. “Because family is the first word they use. And the last they forget.”

Her voice cracked, and for the first time, Arel realized she carried her own questions, heavy and hidden.

That night, the Anthem played louder than usual, drowning out the murmurs of the city. Loudspeakers declared: *“Disorder has no place in Veyronis. Citizens are safe. Citizens are loyal. Citizens are grateful.”*

But in the apartments, behind closed doors, people whispered differently:

“Where is the baker?”
“Where is the boy with the kite?”
“Where do they take them?”

And always, at the center of those whispers, was the same spark: *Arel asked*.

The next morning, graffiti appeared on the side of a factory wall. Just one word, written in chalk, trembling but defiant:

WHY.

It was gone by noon, scrubbed clean, but not before half the district had seen it.

For the first time in years, the Empire of Order felt something it could not control. Not rebellion. Not violence. A question.

And questions, once planted, do not stay buried. They grow.

Chapter VI — The Gathering Storm

The city of Veyronis looked the same as always—banners snapping in the wind, statues gleaming, soldiers marching in time. But beneath the surface, the rhythm had changed. Whispers moved like underground rivers, silent but steady, gathering strength. And at the heart of it, though he did not know it yet, was Arel.

It began with the graffiti.
Though the word *WHY* had been erased from the factory wall, others appeared. On the back of a school desk. On a bathroom stall. Etched faintly into the dust of a window. Each time it was wiped away, another took its place.

The Empire's officers blamed factory workers, then students, then "discontented elements." But in the streets, people said something else:

"They say it started with a boy."

At school, Arel felt the weight of eyes on him. Some children avoided him, afraid. Others whispered his name like a secret. One girl slipped him a folded scrap of paper. On it was just one word: **Where?**

He kept it in his pocket beside the marble.

The marketplace shifted too. Vendors who once smiled politely now offered him fruit with a glance that lingered too long. Mrs. Rima whispered, "They ask your questions in the bread lines." A man repairing shoes muttered as Arel passed, "The boy sees with both eyes."

It frightened his parents.

One evening, his father shut the windows tight and spoke in a harsh whisper. "You must stop. Do you hear me? These questions—they are dangerous."

"But why?" Arel asked, his voice small but steady.

His father slammed a fist onto the table. "Because people are listening!"

The silence that followed was heavy. His father's shoulders sagged. "They will punish us all," he said. "They don't fear swords. They fear voices. And your voice is too loud."

His mother reached for Arel's hand, her grip trembling. "You don't understand. Even truth can kill."

Arel stared at her, wide-eyed. "Then why do we keep it alive?"

She had no answer.

The Empire noticed.

The **Office of Civic Harmony** issued new decrees. Loudspeakers announced: *"Unauthorized questions are a form of disorder. Disorder weakens unity. Citizens must report confusion immediately."* Posters appeared with slogans painted in red: *"Loyalty is silence. Doubt is betrayal."*

And yet, doubt was everywhere.

In the park, old men who once played chess in silence now whispered, "Where did the baker go?"
At school, children repeated questions they had overheard: "Why do apples all look the same? Why do soldiers carry guns if peace is complete?"
At the factory gates, workers muttered, "If obedience is love, why does it hurt?"

The questions spread, small and sharp, carving cracks in the walls of certainty.

One afternoon, Arel was stopped by a soldier while walking home from school.

"Boy," the soldier said, visor glinting. "What did you ask the teacher yesterday?"

Arel's heart pounded. "I asked why the Chancellor is always right."

The soldier was silent. His jaw clenched. For a moment, Arel thought he would be struck. But instead, the man whispered, almost to himself: "I asked the same thing once."

Then he straightened, barked, "Move along!" and marched away.

Arel stood frozen, the marble in his pocket burning against his palm. He realized something then: even the soldiers carried questions, buried deep where no one could see.

That night, as the family walked home from the market, they passed the Daren house again. Its windows were boarded, its door locked. Arel stopped. "Why doesn't anyone put flowers here?" he asked softly.

His father's hand tightened on his shoulder. "Don't."

But an old woman nearby heard. She bent, pulled a single wilted flower from her basket, and placed it at the doorstep. "For the baker," she murmured.

Others paused. One left an apple. Another laid down a pebble. Soon the doorstep was covered in small offerings: fruit, flowers, scraps of cloth.

By the next morning, the soldiers had cleared it all away. But that night, the doorstep filled again.

The crack in the wall was widening.

In the towers of the Empire, the Chancellor's ministers debated. Reports piled on their desks: whispers in the markets, children repeating forbidden words, graffiti spreading like vines.

"It is not organized," one official argued. "It is only a boy."

"Then silence the boy," another said coldly.

"But killing a child—"

"Better one voice than a thousand."

The room fell silent.

Down in the city, Arel lay awake, staring at the ceiling. He whispered to the marble:

"Why do questions feel like fire?"

And somewhere, in the silence that followed, he thought he heard an answer—carried not by the marble, but by the murmurs of the city itself:

Because fire spreads.

Chapter VII — The Trial of Silence

The summons came again, but this time it was not called a **Courtesy Session**. The envelope was black, stamped with the seal of the sword and crown. Inside, the words were sharper:

“Family 27 will present itself at the Hall of Civic Loyalty. Attendance mandatory. Evaluation of minor citizen Arel included.”

His father folded the letter carefully, as if folding could break its teeth. His mother sat very still, her spoon untouched in the bowl.

Arel watched them. “What do they want?”

His father’s voice was flat. “They want to measure your loyalty.”

“But loyalty isn’t a number,” Arel said.

His mother reached across the table and gripped his hand tightly. “Please, Arel,” she whispered. “This time, say what they want to hear.”

The **Hall of Civic Loyalty** was a vast chamber, its ceiling so high it made voices small. Rows of citizens filled the benches, summoned to witness. At the front, beneath a colossal portrait of the Chancellor, sat three officials in gray coats. Soldiers lined the walls, rifles gleaming.

Arel was led to a platform in the center. His parents sat behind him, pale as parchment.

An official rose. His voice was smooth, practiced. “This session concerns the boy Arel, age eleven, who has exhibited signs of disorderly curiosity. We will give him an opportunity to demonstrate clarity and obedience.”

Arel’s heart pounded, but he stood straight. The marble in his pocket pressed cool against his palm.

The official began. “Arel, who gives us peace?”

“The Chancellor,” Arel recited, as he had learned.

“Who protects us from chaos?”

“The soldiers.”

“Who decides truth?”

“The Empire.”

Murmurs of approval rippled through the crowd. His mother's shoulders sagged in relief. His father closed his eyes.

But then, the official leaned forward. "And tell us, boy—what is loyalty?"

The answer he was supposed to give sat heavy on his tongue: *Loyalty is silence.*

He opened his mouth. The words would not come.

Instead, he heard himself say: "Loyalty is speaking the truth, even when you are afraid."

The hall froze.

His mother gasped. His father half-rose to his feet. Soldiers shifted, hands tightening on rifles.

The official's smile vanished. "That is not loyalty. That is rebellion."

Arel lifted his chin. "Then why does silence hurt more than questions?"

Gasps spread through the benches. A murmur rose, small at first, then louder. People whispered to one another: *He is right… it does hurt… I asked the same once…*

"Silence!" the official barked.

But the word no longer commanded.

The second official slammed a fist onto the desk. "Child, your words spread confusion. Confusion leads to betrayal. Betrayal leads to death. Do you want death?"

Arel's voice was steady, though his knees shook. "I don't want death. I want to know why people disappear. Why we must pretend to be happy. Why soldiers carry guns if there is peace."

His words echoed in the hall like stones thrown against glass.

A man in the benches stood suddenly. "I asked the same when they took my brother!"

A woman's voice broke through next. "And when they came for my son!"

The murmurs swelled into a tide. Questions flew from every side—questions long buried, now clawing back into light.

The chief official slammed the gavel. "Enough! This boy is a danger to harmony. He will be corrected."

Two soldiers stepped forward. Arel's mother screamed. His father lunged, only to be shoved back.

Arel clutched the marble in his pocket. He looked out at the sea of faces—some afraid, some furious, some alive in ways they had not been for years. He shouted, voice breaking but strong:

“Why do you fear a boy’s words if they are nothing?!”

The hall erupted. People leapt to their feet, shouting, crying, demanding. The word spread like fire: **WHY! WHY! WHY!**

The soldiers froze, uncertain. The officials barked orders, but their voices were drowned by the roar of the crowd.

For the first time, the Anthem could not silence the city.

That night, Veyronis trembled. Soldiers filled the streets, but their eyes darted nervously. Posters were torn down, questions scratched into walls faster than they could be erased.

At home, his parents held Arel close. His father whispered, “You have started something we cannot stop.”

Arel pressed his face into his mother’s shoulder. “Then why shouldn’t we finish it?”

Neither parent could answer.

Chapter VIII — The Accident

The Empire of Order had a long memory for disobedience, but no patience for symbols. Children could be taught. Adults could be broken. But symbols—symbols had to be erased before they grew.

And now a boy had become a symbol.

It began with a whisper in the corridors of the **Office of Civic Harmony**.

“He must be silenced,” one minister said.
“Not publicly,” another warned. “Martyrs are dangerous.”
“Then quietly. An accident. A lesson without a name.”

Orders were written in language so careful it looked harmless: *“The subject will be transferred for correction. Ensure discretion.”*

At home, Arel sensed the change before his parents did. Soldiers lingered longer at corners. Neighbors avoided his eyes. Even the marketplace felt heavier, as if every stall had been told to wait.

One evening, as he rolled his marble across the floor, his mother whispered, “They will come.”

His father’s jaw tightened. “Then we will not open the door.”

But doors in Veyronis were never really yours.

The night it happened, the Anthem was playing softly from the loudspeakers, the strings slow and sweet, as if the Empire wanted to soothe the city to sleep. Arel lay awake, the marble in his palm. His parents sat in the kitchen, speaking in hushed voices.

Then came the knock.

Three times, heavy, patient.

His father rose, fists clenched. His mother’s face turned pale. Arel slipped from bed, peeking from the hall.

“Family 27,” a voice called. “Civic review.”

His father did not move. His mother whispered, “Don’t.”

The door shook as the knock grew louder. The anthem outside swelled, covering the sound of boots.

Then the door burst open.

Soldiers flooded the room, rifles gleaming. His father shouted. His mother screamed. Arel clutched his marble so tightly it cut into his skin.

They dragged him into the hall, ignoring his mother's cries. His father struggled, was struck down. The marble slipped from Arel's hand, rolling across the floor. A soldier's boot crushed it.

Something inside Arel broke. He screamed—not in fear, but in fury. "Why?!"

The word echoed through the stairwell, sharp as glass.

Neighbors' doors cracked open. Faces peeked out. A child cried. An old woman whispered, "Lucky sky," then shook her head.

"Why?!" Arel shouted again, his voice carrying farther than it should have. "Why are you afraid of words?!"

A soldier cursed, shoving him toward the stairs. Arel stumbled. His foot slipped.

The world tilted.

For one terrible second, silence hung. Then came the sickening sound of a body hitting the ground.

The soldiers froze. His parents' screams pierced the night. Neighbors gasped, some rushing forward, others pulled back by fear.

Arel lay still at the bottom of the stairwell, eyes wide open, chest unmoving. The marble's shards glittered beside him, reflecting the harsh light.

The officer in charge hissed to his men. "It was an accident. Record it so."

But no words could disguise what everyone had seen.

By morning, the city knew.

"They killed him."
"No—he fell."
"They pushed him."
"It was an accident."
"It was murder."

No one agreed on the details. But all agreed on one thing: **a boy had died for asking why.**

At the market, people placed flowers where the Daren stall had once stood. At the school, children scratched **WHY** onto their desks. In the factories, workers whispered his name with every hammer strike, every wheel turn.

Mrs. Rima from 4B wept openly in the stairwell, her trembling voice carrying through the building: “He asked for nothing but truth. And they killed him for it.”

The Empire issued a statement: *“A tragic accident. The boy Arel was careless on the stairs. The Empire mourns his loss and urges citizens to remember that safety comes from obedience.”*

But the city did not mourn silently.

That night, candles appeared in windows across Veyronis. Thousands of small flames flickered against the dark, each one whispering the same forbidden word: **Why.**

In the towers of the Empire, the Chancellor’s ministers watched nervously.

“Candles,” one scoffed. “Harmless.”
“Harmless?” another snapped. “They are fire. Fire spreads.”

And indeed, it was spreading.

A boy’s death had cracked the wall. And through that crack, a storm was coming.

Chapter IX — The Spark

For years, the city of Veyronis had slept with its eyes open. It marched when told, clapped when ordered, smiled when commanded. It endured. It obeyed.

But a child's death is something different. A child cannot be accused of plotting, of rebellion, of treachery. A child can only be guilty of being alive. And when that life is taken, even silence cracks.

The day after Arel's fall, the city felt different. The Anthem played as always, but its notes seemed hollow, like music played into an empty jar. Banners rippled in the wind, but people did not look up. They looked at the ground, at each other, at the candles still flickering in windows.

In the marketplace, a woman placed a basket of bread on the empty step of the Daren stall. Beside it, she laid a single flower. Others followed—apples, pebbles, scraps of cloth. Before long, the stall was buried in offerings, not for the baker, but for the boy who had asked why.

The soldiers cleared it by noon. By evening, it was full again.

At school, the teacher tried to begin the Pledge. "I give my voice to the peace of Veyronis—"

But the words died. Children stared at the empty desk where Arel once sat, at the half-drawn kite still folded in Leio's notebook, at the chalk marks on the wall where Arel had scratched questions.

One child whispered, "Why?"

Another answered, "Why?"

And then the whole class murmured it, soft at first, then louder, until Miss Droya's voice broke trying to silence them.

The whispers spread faster than patrols could contain. In the factories, workers carved **WHY** into crates. In the laundries, women stitched it into hems. In the barracks, even soldiers muttered it under their breath, tasting rebellion like forbidden bread.

The Empire called it infection.
The people called it memory.

Three nights after Arel's death, crowds gathered in the park beneath the Founding Sword statue. They brought candles, held low, shielding them with cupped hands. No one shouted. No one sang. They simply stood together in silence, their faces lit by fire.

A soldier barked at them to disperse. No one moved.

Another soldier raised his rifle. His hands shook. And instead of firing, he lowered it again. His visor hid his eyes, but his silence spoke loudly.

The crowd did not cheer. They only stood, their silence heavier than any anthem.

The next night, twice as many came.

The Chancellor's ministers panicked.

"They gather without permission."
"They spread confusion."
"They will bring chaos."

"What do you suggest?" one asked.

"Break them. Show strength."

"Strength?" another muttered. "Or fear?"

But the Chancellor silenced them all with a single decree: *"The gatherings will end. Order will be restored."*

And soldiers were dispatched.

The crackdown came swift. Batons struck candles from hands. Boots trampled flowers. Rifles fired into the night. The park became a battlefield of cries and smoke. But though bodies fell, the fire did not die.

For every candle extinguished, three more appeared the next day.
For every voice silenced, ten more whispered.
For every life taken, the people remembered Arel—the boy who had asked why—and found courage in his name.

In their small apartment, Arel's parents mourned in silence. His mother clutched the shard of marble she had found on the stairwell floor. His father sat with his head in his hands, broken by grief.

But when they heard the chanting outside—"WHY, WHY, WHY"—they looked at each other, and something in their eyes shifted.

Their son was gone. But his question was alive.

And it no longer belonged to a boy. It belonged to a city.

The Spark had been struck.

And the Empire of Veyronis, for the first time in generations, trembled.

Chapter X — The Uprising

The Empire of Order had believed itself eternal. Its walls were high, its statues tall, its Anthem louder than memory. But empires do not fall from lack of strength. They fall when their people remember they are stronger than fear.

And now the people remembered.

It began with refusal.

Factory workers laid down their tools. In the schools, children sat silent during the Pledge, their small voices replaced by one word scratched into desks: **WHY.** In the markets, vendors stopped raising their prices when officials passed; they gave food freely to the hungry.

It was not war yet. It was disobedience. But disobedience, multiplied, is a kind of storm.

The Empire struck back.

Soldiers patrolled every corner, rifles gleaming. Loudspeakers blared warnings day and night: *"Disorder is betrayal. Curiosity is treason. The gatherings are over."* New posters appeared: the Chancellor's face stern above the words, *"Silence protects you."*

But silence no longer protected anyone.

In the evenings, people still gathered in the park. First hundreds, then thousands. They carried candles, but now also banners painted with chalk, the word **WHY** glowing in white against the dark. They chanted not in anger, but in defiance, their voices rising together like a river breaking a dam.

"WHY! WHY! WHY!"

The Anthem tried to drown them, blasting from speakers hidden in the statues. But the crowd sang louder—not words, just sound, raw and human, cracking the marble calm of Veyronis.

The soldiers were ordered to fire.

Some did. Shots rang out. Bodies fell. Cries split the night.

But others hesitated. Their hands shook. A young soldier dropped his rifle and knelt beside a wounded man, pressing cloth to the bleeding. Another tore the visor from his helmet and shouted into the crowd, "I asked the same questions once!"

Discipline fractured. Commanders screamed for order, but order slipped through their fingers like sand.

The first barricades rose the next day. Wooden carts overturned, paving stones pried loose, fires lit in the avenues. People armed themselves with whatever they had—sticks, bottles, tools. The Empire sent armored vehicles; crowds threw stones that rattled uselessly against steel, but every stone carried a word: *Why.*

The High Chancellor appeared on the screens across the city. His face was pale, his voice strained.

“Citizens of Veyronis, you have been misled. This unrest is not freedom—it is chaos. Do you want to see your city burn?”

From the marketplace, a voice shouted back at the screen: “It already burns—in silence!”

And the crowd roared agreement.

In the chaos, Arel’s parents found themselves in the heart of the uprising. His mother carried the shard of his marble tied around her neck with string. His father walked beside her, his face lined with grief but lit with something fierce.

When the crowd surged toward the Hall of Civic Loyalty, they followed. Soldiers blocked the steps, rifles raised. For a moment, time froze.

Then a woman at the front lifted a candle high and shouted: “He died asking why. We live asking why. Will you kill us all for it?”

The rifles did not fire. One by one, soldiers lowered them.

The crowd surged forward, storming the Hall. The portrait of the Chancellor crashed from the wall, shattering across the marble floor. People trampled it without hesitation.

The uprising spread street by street, hour by hour. Some districts fell to chaos—shops looted, fires set. Others organized themselves, guarding neighborhoods, sharing food. The city became two voices at once: rage and hope, destruction and rebirth.

And through it all, the memory of a boy guided them. Chalk on walls. Candles in windows. The question whispered in every corner:

Why do we obey?

By nightfall, Veyronis no longer belonged fully to the Empire. Soldiers deserted. Ministers fled. The loudspeakers still played the Anthem, but fewer listened. In its place rose another sound—raw, unpolished, unstoppable: the voice of a people waking up.

The Chancellor retreated to his palace, surrounded by guards, his voice no longer broadcast. Ministers argued, terrified. One whispered the forbidden truth: “We were undone not by rebels, but by a child.”

And no one dared correct him.

Chapter XI — The Aftermath

Veyronis woke to smoke.

The banners that once hung bright and proud were now torn, blackened by fire. Streets that had been swept clean every dawn were littered with broken glass, overturned carts, and the silent stillness of bodies carried away in the night. The Anthem played faintly from a speaker still clinging to life on a ruined tower, but its notes sounded hollow, drowned by the cries of vendors calling out bread, the clang of hammers fixing barricades, and the low murmur of grief that filled every corner.

The uprising had broken the Empire's grip. But breaking chains does not heal the wrists they scar.

In the marketplace, flowers now covered the steps of the Hall of Civic Loyalty, where once Arel had stood before the officials. His parents came each morning, laying a candle among hundreds, the flame trembling in the wind. People paused to bow their heads there, whispering his name, not as a saint but as a reminder: truth had come from a child's mouth.

His mother clutched the shard of his marble, worn smooth by her thumb. His father rarely spoke, but his silence was no longer the silence of fear—it was the silence of a man who had lost everything except the fire to continue.

The city shifted in strange, uneven ways.

Some districts celebrated openly—children flying kites painted with the word **WHY**, neighbors singing songs long forbidden. The walls of factories were covered in graffiti: *"Truth belongs to everyone," "Freedom begins with a question."*

Other districts seethed in chaos. Looters raided government storehouses, gangs claimed streets. Soldiers who had deserted stood uncertain, some protecting citizens, others grasping power for themselves.

The Empire had not vanished—it had fractured. Ministers fled to the north, vowing to return with reinforcements. The Chancellor remained in his palace, a shadow behind guarded gates, his voice silenced.

Veyronis stood between collapse and rebirth.

In the park beneath the Founding Sword statue, citizens gathered nightly. No Anthem played there now. Instead, people told stories—of those who had disappeared, of the baker who never returned, of Leio with his unfinished kite.

On the seventh night after the uprising, a woman stood and spoke: “My daughter once asked me why her teacher cried during the anthem. I told her it was dust in her eyes. Now I will tell her the truth: it was because the song hurt.”

Others shared their truths. The weight of silence that had crushed them for years poured out like water through broken stone. Tears fell. Laughter followed. It was messy, uneven, alive.

But not all wounds healed in words.

At the edge of the city, the army returned fire on a barricade. Dozens fell. Funerals filled the streets, mothers tearing their clothes in grief, fathers digging graves with bare hands. The revolt had freed their voices, but the price was steep.

Children walked in processions carrying chalk and stones, laying them at the steps of buildings once sacred to the Empire. Soldiers sometimes stood aside, heads bowed. Sometimes they did not, and blood stained the stones again.

Through it all, the question remained.

What now?

Freedom was no longer a whisper. It was a roar, raw and dangerous. But freedom is not enough on its own.

One evening, Arel’s father spoke to the crowd in the park. His voice cracked, but he spoke anyway.

“My son died for asking why. His question tore down walls. But if we stop at tearing, his death will be wasted. We must build. We must answer.”

The crowd fell silent. A child held up a candle and asked, “Answer what?”

His father’s eyes glistened. “Answer what it means to live without fear. Answer what kind of city we want when the Anthem is no longer our song.”

The people listened. Some nodded. Some wept. For the first time, the uprising felt less like a fire and more like a seed.

The next morning, the city began to change. Neighbors organized food for the hungry. Teachers returned to classrooms, not with slogans, but with real questions for their students. Soldiers who had laid down arms walked unarmed through districts, helping repair what had burned.

The Anthem still played in some corners, but in others, it was replaced by a new sound: children’s voices asking questions aloud, and adults answering without fear.

Veyronis had not yet won. The Empire was not yet gone. But the city had shifted forever.

The boy who asked why was gone, yet everywhere.

And from the ashes of his question, a people began to imagine answers.

Chapter XII — The New Dawn

The fires of Veyronis burned for weeks.

Some were fires of destruction—markets looted, archives set ablaze, towers collapsing into ash. But others were fires of remembrance: candles in windows, torches carried through the streets, flames lit at doorsteps to honor those who had vanished. The city was no longer silent. It roared with grief and with hope.

Arel's parents moved among the people quietly, not as leaders but as witnesses. His mother wore the shard of his marble on a cord around her neck. His father carried chalk in his pocket, leaving the word **WHY** on walls whenever he passed.

They did not seek power. They sought only to keep their son's voice alive.

And because of that, the people listened.

But the Empire was not finished.

From the north came reinforcements—armored vehicles rumbling into the city, banners raised high, loudspeakers declaring: *"The Chancellor still reigns. The rebellion is over."*

The people gathered again in the park beneath the Founding Sword statue, thousands strong. They carried no rifles, only candles, banners, and stones. Soldiers encircled them, rifles raised.

The commander shouted, "Disperse, or be dispersed."

No one moved.

Arel's mother stepped forward, lifting the marble shard high. Her voice trembled but carried: "You killed my son because he asked why. Now we all ask it. Will you kill us all?"

The crowd echoed, wave upon wave: "WHY! WHY! WHY!"

The order came. Shots rang out. Chaos erupted.

People screamed, scattered. Candles fell and shattered. But still, the chant rose through smoke: "WHY!"

Arel's father shielded his wife as soldiers advanced. A bullet struck his chest. He fell without a word, chalk spilling from his hand, rolling into the dust.

His mother knelt beside him, sobbing, clutching the marble shard. Another shot cracked. She, too, collapsed, her body curling around his as though trying to shield him even in death.

The crowd froze. Time itself seemed to hold its breath.

Then someone shouted, voice breaking: “They killed the boy! They killed his parents too!”

The words tore through the crowd like lightning. Fear broke. Grief hardened into fury.

The uprising that followed was no longer hesitation. It was fire.

Workers stormed the factories, seizing tools as weapons. Students filled the streets, chanting Arel’s name. Soldiers threw down rifles, joining the people. The park became a battlefield, but this time the people did not scatter. They surged forward, overwhelming the armored vehicles with sheer numbers, climbing their sides, tearing down the banners.

The Hall of Civic Loyalty fell. The Ministry of Order burned. Ministers fled or surrendered.

And when the gates of the Chancellor’s palace finally opened, it was not soldiers who entered first, but children—children carrying chalk and candles, leaving outlines of their hands on the palace walls.

By dawn, Veyronis was no longer the Empire’s.

The Chancellor vanished. Some said he fled north. Others whispered he had hidden in his own palace, trembling. No one knew. No one cared. The city had already chosen: the Anthem no longer played. In its place, the people sang their own songs—broken, imperfect, but theirs.

At the center of the square, where the statue of the Founding Sword once stood, people built a new monument: three outlines carved into stone. A child. A mother. A father. Above them, one word etched in deep letters:

WHY.

The people of Veyronis had lost much—too much. But from loss came clarity. They no longer bowed when told. They no longer smiled without their eyes. They no longer silenced their children.

The New Dawn was not perfect. It was loud, messy, filled with arguments and tears. But it was alive.

And for the first time in generations, the city understood: freedom does not come from answers. It comes from never being afraid to ask why.

Epilogue — The Boy Who Asked Why

Years passed. Seasons that once marched in perfect order returned in their own rhythm. Winter did not always end on time, and spring sometimes arrived messy, with too much rain. But no one complained. People learned that unpredictability was not weakness—it was life.

The Empire of Order was gone. The Chancellor's face no longer watched from banners. The Anthem was never played again. In its place rose voices untrained, unpolished, each singing differently. And somehow, their differences made a harmony no Anthem had ever known.

At the center of the city stood the monument: three outlines carved into stone, a child, a mother, a father. Beneath them, one word etched deeper than any sword could cut:

WHY.

Children played around the monument. They traced the outlines with chalk, added their own beside them, laughed as they smeared their hands with color. Parents did not stop them. Instead, they smiled—not tight, not false, but real.

Every year, on the day of Arel's death, the people gathered in the square. They carried candles, but not in silence. They told stories. They asked questions aloud, even the hardest ones, because they had learned that questions were not enemies but seeds.

Schools changed first. Teachers no longer began with pledges but with questions: *What is justice? What is love? Why must we care for one another?* And children raised their hands, not in fear, but in eagerness. The classrooms echoed with curiosity once forbidden, now celebrated.

Markets changed too. Stalls no longer displayed perfect rows of identical fruit. Apples came bruised, misshapen, sweet in different ways. Vendors laughed, boasting: "The uglier, the tastier!" And people bought them gladly, because difference had become a kind of freedom.

Even soldiers changed. They no longer patrolled with rifles, but walked the streets unarmed, carrying tools, helping repair homes, lifting loads for the elderly. Their uniforms bore no crown, no sword—only a simple emblem: a hand open, palm raised, asking.

The memory of Arel did not fade. Children spoke his name as if he were one of their own playmates. Parents told the story at bedtime: the boy who asked why, and how his question toppled walls higher than towers.

His mother and father were remembered too—not as heroes carved in bronze, but as ordinary people who loved deeply and paid the price. Their faces appeared in murals across the city, always side by side with their son.

One evening, many years after the uprising, an old woman—Mrs. Rima from 4B—stood at the monument with a cane in her hand. She traced the child's outline with trembling fingers.

She whispered, "Lucky sky," as she had so many times before. But this time, the words were not fear. They were gratitude.

A small boy beside her tugged at his father's sleeve. "Why do we light candles for people we never met?"

His father smiled. Not the brittle smile of obedience, but the tender smile of someone unafraid.

"Because remembering is a kind of love," he said.

The boy tilted his head. "And why is love important?"

The father knelt, kissed his forehead, and answered, "Because love is what keeps questions alive."

The boy laughed, ran to trace his hand beside the outlines, and the stone glowed faintly with chalk dust under the fading sun.

Above the city, the sky turned red and gold, not with banners, but with the fire of sunset. And the people of Veyronis lifted their faces, unafraid of what tomorrow would ask of them.

For they had learned, at last, that freedom does not come from silence.

It comes from a child's voice, small but unyielding, asking the question that empires fear most:

Why?