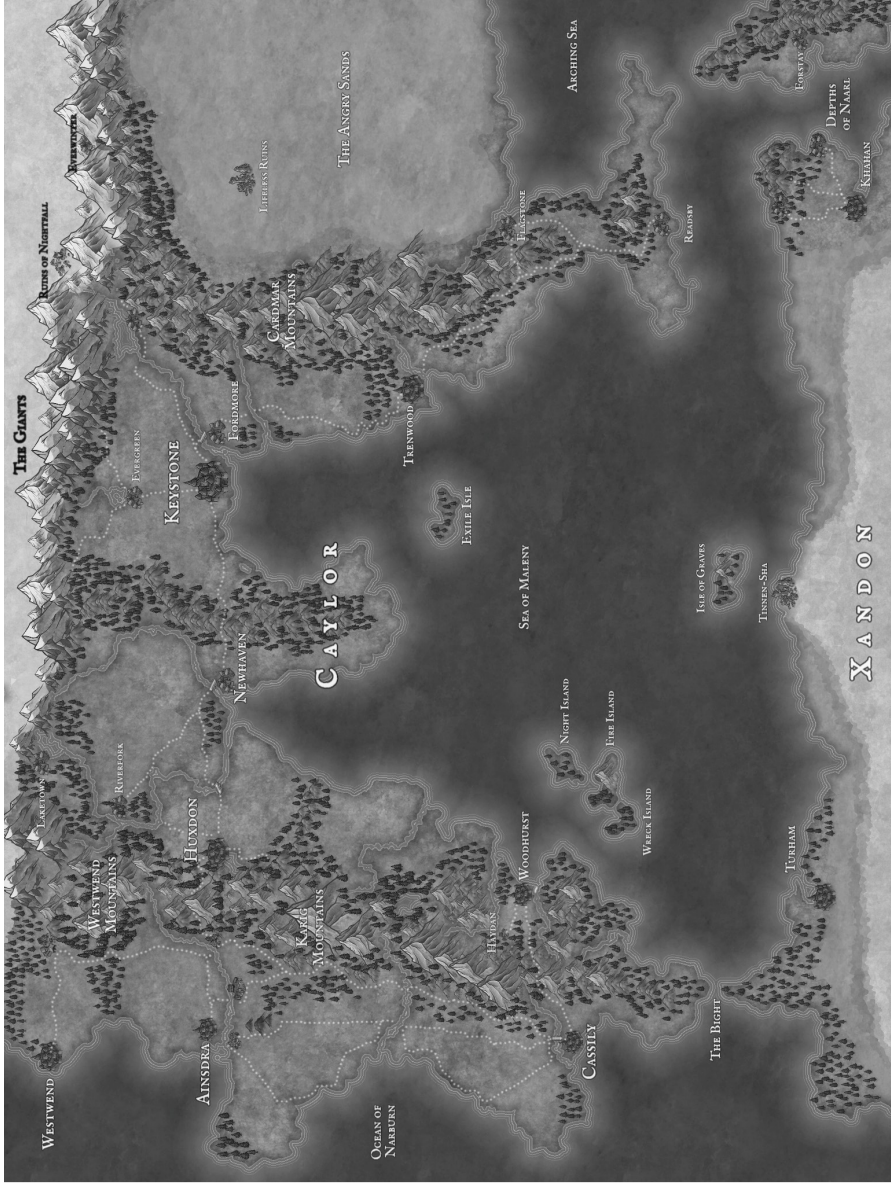




THE SHARDBEARER CYCLE
BOOK ONE

THE LAST
SHARD
DEBBIE ATHERTON



CHAPTER 1

THE LAST SHARD

The young buck remained oblivious to the threat lurking downwind. It grazed peacefully between ancient oaks whose gnarled branches stretched toward the crystalline blue sky, its velvet-soft muzzle nibbling on tender emerald shoots that peeked above the rust-coloured carpet of decaying leaves. The crisp spring morning air carried the scent of pine sap and wild honeysuckle. The scattered late-season snows that had blanketed these rolling foothills had retreated like ghostly armies in defeat, though the jagged granite peaks looming in the distance still wore their glittering white crowns that would remain until the scorching days of high summer.

Finn slowly drew back on the bowstring until it kissed the corner of his chapped lips, his calloused fingers steady against the fletching as he sighted along the ash shaft. His breathing slowed to match the rhythm of the forest. He found the vital spot behind the front leg where the heart pulsed beneath the tawny hide, held for two heartbeats, and released. The arrow hissed through the dappled sunlight and struck with a meaty *thunk*. The deer's legs buckled instantly beneath its muscular frame. It kicked once, twice, hooves scrabbling against the loamy soil, then shuddered into stillness, its liquid brown eyes glazing over.

Will burst from behind a lichen-covered boulder, whooping and laughing, his voice echoing through the silent forest.

"Perfect shot, Finn!" exclaimed Will, slapping his friend's shoulder with a calloused palm. Finn trotted toward their prize, dried leaves crunching beneath his worn leather boots. They stood over the magnificent creature, its coat warm to the touch.

Finn's normally solemn face broke into a rare smile. The clean kill had been perfect, through the heart, a testament to countless hours of practice. Will's approval, never given lightly despite his cheerful nature, warmed him more than any hearth fire.

Finn watched his best friend kneel beside the carcass, unsheathing the bone-handled hunting knife from his belt with practiced ease. Will's sandy hair caught the filtered sunlight like burnished copper, his dancing emerald eyes alight with excitement. Though shorter than Finn by half a hand, Will's wiry frame concealed surprising strength as he rolled the buck onto its back. His perpetually

sun-freckled face always seemed ready to break into laughter, even now as he prepared for the bloody work ahead. Within no time they had dressed the carcass ready for transporting back home.

Unlike his exuberant companion, Finn preferred the quiet spaces between words. His raven-black hair fell in untamed waves past his jawline, frequently obscuring deep blue eyes that missed nothing. When coaxed into revealing itself, his smile transformed his solemn features like sunshine breaking through storm clouds, but such moments were rare treasures. His broad shoulders and powerful arms, developed from years breaking yearlings on his family's horse farm, made his hunting bow seem almost toy-like in his grip. Though both stood on the cusp of manhood, under one year shy of their eighteenth naming day ceremony, the village elders still referred to them as "the boys"—much to Will's vocal chagrin.

The buck would make a triumphant conclusion to their overnight hunting expedition. The pair of plump hares they'd snared the previous evening hung from Finn's belt, their once-white tails now stained with dirt. They had planned to try their luck with fishing spears in the crystal-clear streams that meandered between these hills and home, but with such a prize now secured, they would return directly to the farm, where their unexpected bounty would be cause for celebration.

Home was Talen, in the kingdom of Caylor, a modest village north-west of the trading town of Woodhurst. Nestled in the dappled foothills of the Karig Mountains, whose jagged ridges stretched northward for leagues until they met the roaring Stoney River, Talen had grown into a bustling village catering to the farmers of the region. Smoke curled from the tavern's chimney each evening, mingling with the sweet scent of fresh bread from the bakery. Horses stamped in the blacksmith's yard, metal ringing as sparks flew—a comforting reminder of the village's reputation. A humble general store, a grain mill whose water-wheel groaned day and night, and a small timber-and-stone hall where the Elder Council met completed the cluster of buildings lining the dusty main street.

The village housed perhaps a hundred families in all—half dwelling in thatched cottages with neat garden plots hugging the main thoroughfare, the rest scattered across the verdant hillsides that rolled away from town. These outlying farmers made their weekly pilgrimages into Talen, arms laden with fresh produce and crafted wares to trade for ironwork and textiles. Most inhabitants cherished their settlement's drowsy tranquility, preferring the predictable rhythm of rural life to the chaos that visitors might bring. And visitors were few and far between.

An hour's ride north of the village, at the mouth of a narrow valley where pines clustered in shadowed gullies, lay the farm where Finn lived. The clearing opened onto rolling green fields, bisected by a crystal stream that murmured through the property year-round. Along its banks, wildflowers leaned over the water, and deer tracks pressed into soft earth beneath ancient oaks.

Finn's household was usual for a farmstead: his mother Ruth, his Aunt Cora, and his Uncle Victor all under one sloped-roof house next to the barn and corrals.

Years before, Ruth had journeyed south from her northern homeland with her husband and brother-in-law, Quinn and Victor, bringing only a stallion, a few mares, and the hope of a fresh start. With hard work and long days, they built their herd into one famed for conformation, endurance, and a willing attitude. Officers from the Cassily and Woodhurst garrisons regularly trotted off on their mounts, boots brushing stirrups, while occasionally a prized stallion made its way all the way to the capital of Caylor, Keystone - though the shipping fees there were steep.

When Finn was only two, his father, Quinn, slipped on a rocky ledge while hunting and met his end at the base of a cliff. His grave lay shaded by a lonely oak tree out back of the house, its broad roots curling protectively around the small headstone. Ruth never took another husband; instead, the farm's hearth glowed brighter with Victor's new wife, Cora, bringing her own warmth and laughter to the home.

Finn's happiest days were spent with his best friend, Will - freckled Will whose full name, Willard, nobody but his stern father ever used. They'd grown up inseparable, racing through the fields at dawn, chasing pheasants amid brambles, and wrestling in the hayloft until sunset painted the valley gold. Will was the tanner's second son, yet the acrid tang of curing hides had never held his heart. His father, long since resigned to Will's wanderlust, let him track deer and fish for trout with Finn whenever he could - it supplemented the tannery with hides and fresh meat for the family. At night, they'd lie under the stars, and Will would dream of distant cities, certain that Talen's emerald hills were far too small to contain his ambitions.



Suddenly, a cacophony of noise broke Finn's thoughts, the hush of the forest shattered as the underbrush exploded in a frenzy of snapping twigs and rustling leaves. Something was blundering through the forest. Hot on its trail thundered four riders, hooves drumming against the damp, needle-strewn earth. Finn and Will froze, mouths agape, as the chase bore down upon them.

Moments later, the quarry emerged: a broad-shouldered man, his clothes torn and smeared with dark blood, staggering but upright, every muscle straining toward safety. He halted abruptly and wheeled to face his pursuers. The horsemen reined in, the animals' flanks heaving and slick with sweat, heads bowing as steam curled from their nostrils.

Two riders dropped to the forest floor. Their sunburnt faces were framed by dusty turbans, their dark eyes cold beneath thick brows. Long beards, flecked

with grit, swayed overflowing robes dyed in deep ochre and indigo - the garb of Xandon's nomads who crossed the torrid seas of the Bight as mercenaries for any who could pay. Finn recalled his uncle's warning: never trust Xandonian desert riders.

"You're done for, man. Let it go," one mercenary drawled in a low, guttural accent. The wounded man offered only a fierce glare in reply.

Closer now, Finn saw the hunter's garb - leather jerkin and oilskins—slashed in places, caked with mud and blood. He carried a sword at his side and a bow over his right shoulder. A broken arrow protruded at a crooked angle from his left shoulder. His breathing was ragged yet controlled as he braced himself for what was to come.

"So be it," murmured the leader, and the other two horsemen dismounted and formed a loose circle around their prey. Each bore a large, curved sword with elaborately jewelled pommels that caught stray shafts of sunlight between the trees. In a fluid motion, they advanced, blades singing low arcs through humid air.

Without hesitation, the wounded man sprang forward. Despite the weight of his injuries, his movements were astonishingly swift and precise—each footfall a measured beat, every swing of his own slender blade a graceful, deadly arc. In a heartbeat, he sliced across the throat of the nearest mercenary; blood spurted, and the man collapsed, his horse whinnying in alarm. The second rider yelled as the hunter's blade severed through flesh and bone at the elbow. The man dropped to his knees, clutching the gushing stump, and started howling in pain and shock.

Only two mercenaries remained. They backed away at pace, eyes wide in grudging respect. One spat on the ground.

"Shut up, Dros!" he snarled at the fallen man. Dros's screams tapered into a final, rattling sigh; his body went limp, blood pooling beneath him.

"Just hand it over and we'll leave you be," the mercenary snarled. Silently, the wounded hunter lowered his sword and, with his uninjured arm, peeled back the dark hood shielding his face. Damp hair clung to his forehead, and a beard, flecked with red, framed a jaw clenched in determination. His eyes—deep-set and burning—held the cornered fury of a man who refused to surrender.

The two mercenaries lunged at the same time from opposite sides. In one flash, the hunter drew a slender throwing knife and hurled it with unerring aim. The blade sank into one attacker's eye socket; he staggered, a wet gurgle rising in his throat before he pitched forward. The other mercenary, quicker on his feet, ducked beneath the hunter's next swing and drove his own blade deep into the man's midsection. The hunter staggered, mouth open in a ragged gasp as crimson spurted between his ribs. Then, summoning every ounce of strength, he lunged with his sword, guiding it between bone and heart. The mercenary's eyes went blank, and he slumped to the forest floor. Silence reclaimed the trees.

The wounded man collapsed against a moss-covered stump, crimson blooming across his leather jerkin like spilled wine. His chest heaved with each laboured breath, sweat-matted hair clinging to his ashen face. Finn and Will stood frozen, jaws slack, the forest's sudden silence broken only by the wet gurgle of a dying mercenary.



Finn's legs trembled as he approached, stepping over a fallen scimitar that still gleamed with fresh blood.

"Sir, are you alright?" The words tumbled from his dry mouth, hanging foolishly in the air between them.

The man's head snapped up, pain-glazed eyes suddenly sharpening like a predator scenting prey. A muscle twitched in his blood-spattered jaw.

"Who are you?" he growled, fingers instinctively tightening around his sword hilt.

"I, I, I'm Finn," he stammered, Adam's apple bobbing in his throat.

The stranger's gaze flicked between the boys, noting their worn hunting leathers and simple bows. His shoulders relaxed a fraction, though blood continued to seep between the fingers pressed to his side.

"Where are you from, boy?" His voice rasped like steel on stone.

"Talen." Will replied stepping forward, freckles stark against his pale face. "It's not far. We were hunting. You fought off four men!" His words tumbled out in breathless awe. "How did you do that? Who were they? What did they want?"

The wounded man looked from Finn to Will, his weathered face ashen beneath streaks of dirt and blood. He shook his head slowly; lips pressed into a grimace.

"This is not good," he sighed, calloused fingers pressing against the ragged wound in his belly. Crimson seeped between his knuckles, dripping onto the forest floor where it darkened the moss to black.

"We can take you to my house," Finn's voice cracked. "Ma is a healer. She'll know what to do."

"I won't make it," the man whispered, a bubble of blood forming at the corner of his mouth. "So be it." His amber eyes, clear despite his pain, fixed on the boys. One trembling hand beckoned them closer.

They exchanged glances, Will's freckles stark against his pallor, before inching forward. Pine needles crunched beneath their boots. The metallic scent of blood hung in the air, mingling with the forest's damp, earthy aroma.

When they were close enough to see the sweat beading on the stranger's forehead, they stopped. The man's fingers fumbled at his throat, pulling a leather thong from beneath his blood-soaked shirt. An unremarkable small pouch dangled from it.

"Listen carefully," he rasped, each word measured. "This is what they were after. Desert men, sea-traders, Blueblades - they all seek it. They will burn villages and slaughter innocents without hesitation." His fingers tightened around the pouch. "They must not get it. Do you understand?"

Both boys nodded, throats too dry for words. The forest's usual chorus of birdsong had fallen silent, as if the very woods held their breath.

He winced, teeth clenched against a fresh wave of pain. His chest rose with a laboured intake of breath. He reached into his shirt and pulled an old leather pouch up over his head.

"Take it. Keep it safe." Blood bubbled between his lips as he coughed and passed the pouch to Finn. "There's an old healer in Ainsdra. Rafferty. White beard, crooked spine. Take it to him." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Don't delay. There are more of them coming. I led them away, but not far enough."

His eyelids fluttered, the whites showing momentarily as he fought to remain conscious. Finn and Will knelt beside him, their knees sinking into the blood-soaked earth.

"I think it's the last," he breathed, words barely audible over the rustling leaves. "The last of twelve. The last... shard." His head lolled to one side, consciousness fleeing like mist before the morning sun.



Finn looked from the man's ashen face to Will's wide eyes and gasped, "What in the nine hells do we do?"

"I don't know!" Will exclaimed, his voice cracking like a dry twig. Sweat beaded on his forehead despite the cool forest air.

Finn's heart hammered against his ribs as he assessed their situation. The forest loomed around them, ancient pines stretching toward the sky. The dying man's chest barely moved, blood seeping through his fingers in red rivulets. Four dead mercenaries lay sprawled in unnatural poses, their ochre robes darkening with blood. The four horses, nostrils flaring and tails swishing nervously, pawed at the needle-covered ground. Their partially-butchered deer carcass lay nearby, forgotten.

"We need to get him home," Finn said, his voice steadier than his trembling hands as he hung the pouch around his own neck.

"What?" Will's face contorted in disbelief, freckles standing stark against his pallor. "Are you crazy? There's mercenaries after him!"

"We have to help him!" Finn insisted.

"No, we don't!" Will shouted, his voice echoing through the silent trees.

"Will, calm down." Finn glanced over his shoulder, half-expecting a scimitar-wielding mercenary to come crashing through the underbrush, sunlight glinting off deadly steel. Will inhaled deeply, his shoulders dropping as he nodded.

"Okay, but seriously, Finn," he whispered, "what do we do?"

"We get him home," Finn replied, kneeling beside the wounded stranger. "Ma's herbs might save him, and Uncle Vic will know what to do next."

Will nodded, wiping his damp palms against his hunting leathers. "Right. Right. That makes sense. They'll will know what to do."



They worked quickly together, hands trembling but determined. Finn retrieved two of the mercenary horses—a muscular bay with a white blaze down its face and a deep-chested grey with wild eyes that rolled white at the scent of blood. Both animals snorted and stamped, nostrils flaring, but they seemed sturdy enough to bear double riders. Will gathered up their deer carcass, its hide still warm, and lashed it with practiced knots to the back of the grey's ornate Xandonian saddle. There was no point in wasting good meat, even on a day like this.

The large bay horse sidled sideways, hooves crunching on pine needles as they heaved the dying stranger up into the saddle. Blood from the man's wound smeared across the leather. Finn calmed the nervous beast with a gentle rub behind its velvety ear and whispered soothing words he'd used since childhood. The horse's breathing steadied, and it stood stock-still as Will cupped his dirt-stained hands to boost Finn up behind the slumped stranger. Will mounted the other horse with a grunt, pointed its head toward home across the shadowed forest, and led off at a brisk trot that sent birds scattering from nearby branches.

They kept to the narrow deer trails where they could, the horses' hooves crunching through carpets of russet pine needles but occasionally had to divert around gnarled roots or limestone gullies that cut like knife wounds through the forest floor. Blood from the stranger's wound had soaked through his tunic and now stained Finn's sleeve, warm and sticky against his skin. The man's head lolled with each jolting step; his ragged breathing barely audible over the horses' laboured snorts as they picked their way downhill through the dappled shadows of the high country.

Finn recognized every twist in the path, every lightning-struck oak and moss-covered boulder—landmarks that had guided him since he was small enough to ride during their first hunting trips. Will led them through a shortcut that sliced through a thicket of blackthorn, branches clawing at their clothes like desperate fingers. When they finally broke free from the forest's edge, sunlight washed over them, and they dug their heels into the horses' flanks, urging them

into a thundering canter across the golden sea of hayfields that surrounded Finn's farm.



Uncle Vic stood in the centre of the big corral, his weathered hands gentle on the chestnut yearling's velvet muzzle. Deep creases fanned from the corners of his blue eyes as he murmured soothing words only the horse could hear. Sweat darkened the back of his homespun linen shirt, plastering it to the knobs of his spine, while the morning sun beat down mercilessly on his oak-broad shoulders, glinting off the silver streaks in his close-cropped hair. The colt's ears flicked forward, then back, nostrils quivering as he tested the leather halter. A good sign. This one had liquid brown eyes and delicate face that the merchant's wives from Cassily always favoured. Unlike the rough-handed breeders from the northern provinces who left their stock wild until breaking time, Vic coaxed his yearlings with soft words, teaching them to accept a man's touch long before they ever felt a saddle. His methods yielded horses with confidence and steady temperaments that commanded twice the coin at market.

He had just unlatched the yearling's halter, watching it trotting with high-stepping excitement back to the nearby herd of youngsters, when the ground beneath his boots began to vibrate. Distant thunder—no, hoof beats—pounded toward the farmhouse. Vic's hand instinctively moved to the knife at his belt as he squinted against the harsh sunlight. Two large horses crested the hill by the hayfield, their flanks lathered white with exertion. Will's hair caught the light as he rode atop one mount, while the other bore what looked like a misshapen giant. Vic's breath caught—it was two riders on one horse, the front man's head lolling lifelessly, dark stains spreading across unfamiliar garments, and behind him, ...Finn! "By the nine hells," Vic whispered, already running for the gate.



They thundered toward the small corral nearest the house, dust billowing behind them like a storm cloud. Vic's weathered boots pounded across the yard as he yanked open the wooden gate, its hinges shrieking in protest. The boys guided their lathered mounts through the opening, foam dripping from the animals' bit-clenched mouths. Will dismounted in a fluid motion, his boots hitting the packed earth with a dull thud.

"Quick! He's dying!" Will shouted, his face flushed crimson beneath his freckles as he stretched up toward the blood-soaked stranger. Finn's arms trembled under the man's dead weight, the stranger's head lolling back to reveal a sickly grey pallor

beneath his sweat-slicked skin. Together, they lowered him over the heaving flank of the bay horse, dark blood immediately staining Vic's homespun tunic.

Ruth burst from the cabin, her flour-dusted hands already reaching for her herb pouch, eyes widening at the scene before her.

"What in the name of the ancients happened?" she demanded, fingers flying to untie her apron.

"Xandonian blade to the gut and an arrow through his shoulder," Will gasped between ragged breaths. "He fought off four of them!"

As they carried the limp form across the cabin threshold, Finn slid from his mount, fingers fumbling with sweat-slick buckles and blood-soaked leather straps, dragging the tack from both horses and unceremoniously dumping it on the ground. The horses' sides heaved like bellows, nostrils flaring. He abandoned them without the customary rubdown and ran toward his home.

CHAPTER 2

BURDEN OF KNOWLEDGE

Finn pushed open the heavy oak door. Inside, the air was thick with the tang of blood and the acrid smoke of the hearth. A single lantern cast quivering shadows over the kitchen table at the room's centre, where the man lay splayed out, shirt torn away. The four wooden chairs had been shoved against the walls to clear space for Ruth's ministrations. She stood over the wounded man like a general in command, barking orders and waving her hands to direct the others.

It wasn't the first time a farmer or traveller had been carried in here for help. Word of Ruth's skill had spread farther than the village healer's tired remedy shop, as she set broken limbs with precision and stitched ragged gashes cleanly. Now, her leather apron smeared with new blood, she bent to the new crisis.

Vic stood at the man's side, prepared to hold him down should he gain consciousness. The sickly odour of putrefaction rose from the arrow wound. Ruth stood opposite him, cleaning his torso with a rag and water from the iron pot on the fire. She traced fresh bruising and a dark, swollen incision in his abdomen. Scars—some old and puckered, others still pink—criss-crossing his arms and torso.

By the hearth, Aunt Cora arranged folded cloths with practiced hands. Silver threaded through her once-auburn hair caught the firelight as she bent to lift a woven basket. It brimmed with balms, tinctures and Ruth's weathered old herbal book, its leather spine cracked from years of consultations. In the corner, Will stood rigid by Finn's pallet, hands clasped, ready to leap forward at a nod.

"This is odd," Ruth murmured, as she dabbed the belly wound with a linen swab. The blood she wiped away refused to flow; the cut should have bled freely. She frowned, the lantern light casting her cheeks in a pale hue. "It doesn't make sense." Quickly, she threaded a curved needle and began stitching the tissue.

Vic pointed at the man's shoulder. The arrow lay not too deep, but the skin around it had turned a bruised purple-black. "Look at that," he said. "Either it's been lodged far too long or ... " He swallowed, " ... it's poisoned."

Ruth straightened. "Cora, bring me charcoal, jewelweed, and thrymlock. Make a poultice for his shoulder." At the words, Aunt Cora scrambled for the mortar and pestle, grinding the herbs into a grim-smelling paste. Ruth turned back to Vic. "That arrowhead has to come out. Now."

The lantern swung as the boys moved in to steady the unconscious man. Will poured the now boiling water over Vic's blade and wiped it clean. Vic swiftly cut around the arrowhead, and with one swift pull, dislodged the barbed tip. A thin ribbon of blood welled, then slowed when a clean cloth was pressed firmly. Cora smeared the herbal poultice over the wound and bound it with fresh linen strips, the bitter scent hanging heavy in the air. She returned to Ruth's side to help with the final stitches.

Vic wiped his blade on a rag and looked to Finn. "What happened out there?"

Finn's breath came in quick gulps. "We'd just brought down a stag when this man burst from the forest, bleeding and with the arrow in his shoulder. Four riders in dark robes and curved steel swords chased him - Xandonians, I think. He fought them off, but the last one stabbed him in the gut before he killed him."

Finn continued. "He said they wanted the thing around his neck. He told us to keep it safe and take it to an old healer called Rafferty in Ainsdra. That it was the last shard,' he whispered." He glanced at Will, who nodded. "Then we rode hard to get him here."

Ruth's needle halted above the wound. Her eyes fixed on the leather pouch swinging from Finn's neck as he leaned forward. The blood seemed to retreat from her face, leaving it ashen in the lantern light. "It can't be," she whispered. "The shard—you didn't touch it with your bare skin?" Finn shook his head once, quick and certain.

"Thank the ancients," Ruth breathed. Vic, too, stared in stunned silence. Cora and the boys exchanged uneasy looks.

"Will, can you please tend to the horses and bring the gear in?" Vic's voice cut through the tension like a blade. Will's shoulders visibly relaxed, his eyes darting toward the door. He nodded once, grateful for the escape, and slipped outside. The door slammed shut behind him.

Vic extended an open palm toward his nephew. Without a word, Finn lifted the cord from his neck and surrendered the pouch. With reverent caution, Vic shielded his fingers with a scrap of linen, then coaxed the object from its hiding place: a sliver of midnight, tapering to a lethal point, its surface drinking the lantern's glow rather than reflecting it. Nature, not craft, had shaped its flawless form.

"What is it, Vic?" Cora whispered, voice trembling.

Vic and Ruth exchanged a quick, knowing glance beneath the flickering lantern light. Ruth's gentle nod whispered her agreement, and together they stood and faced the others in the room.

Vic drew a slow breath, the hush settling around him like a shroud. He leaned against the rough-hewn beam and began. "Finn, you know your Ma, Pa, and I came from the North, don't you?"

"Aye," Finn said, his voice barely audible as memories stirred behind his eyes.

"We fled the North when your grandfather's lands, our home, grew dangerous—men spoke of dark deeds and strange riders passed through villages at night. Your grandfather gave us his best horses, one stunning colt and four good mares, to start afresh in more peaceful pastures. We travelled through storms that soaked us to the bone and mud that nearly swallowed our wheels. Then we found this valley, built these walls with our own hands, and it was here, under this very roof, that you drew your first breath."

He paused, the hearth's glow playing across his weathered features. "Then came the day a stranger arrived looking for work, gaunt and worn as an old sack, yet he talked of horses as if they were kin. We needed help for foaling season and building the barn, so we took him in. He said his name was Fendrel, though I doubt that was his true name. He worked hard, spoke seldom, and was respectful, but after a month, he grew restless and began to speak of moving on. Before he could ride away, a squad of mercenaries thundered down our lane, swords drawn. Fendrel fought like a man possessed, felling six of them, and your Pa and I loosed arrows into the rest. He saved us all... but at a terrible cost. As he lay dying, he showed us a similar pouch with an obsidian shard within." Vic's gaze flicked to Ruth, whose steady presence glowed with resolve.

He held the pouch aloft. "Whoever bears these shards is pursued without mercy—by unknown hunters, for unknown reasons. We must help him. But know this: they will come for him, and for us, soon."

Ruth drew a firm breath, her voice unwavering. "You're right, Vic. We're *all* in danger now."

Vic stepped forward, gathering his wife into his arms. He looked down into her tear-bright eyes. "Cora, I can't leave him here to die. I'll hitch the wagon, take him toward the coast, and send him off on a ship."

She trembled against him, fresh tears brimming. "No, Vic. It's too dangerous. They'll catch and kill you!"

He brushed her hair back with gentle insistence. "They'll kill us all if he stays. We have no choice."

She buried her face in his shoulder, and he wrapped his arms tighter around her, both drawing courage from the other as the crackling hearth bore witness to their sadness.



Will pushed open the heavy oak door and stepped into the room, shoulders bowed under the weight of the deer carcass, their bulging packs, and the gleaming steel of the stranger's sword. The smell of damp earth and game blood clung to him as he froze in the threshold: every face in the rough-hewn room was tight with emotion. Hesitantly, he lowered the slick carcass onto the straw-padded floor, its

hide glinting in the lantern light, then unceremoniously dumped the packs and sword onto Finn's pallet. His throat tight, he cleared it and offered, voice hollow, "Ah, anything else you want me to do?"

Vic gently held Cora at arm's length, brushing a stray lock of her damp hair from her face. "Yes, Will. Fetch Big Doug from the side paddock and hitch him to the wagon. The harness is hanging just inside the barn door, left side. We need to leave at once." Relief flickered across Will's features. "Yes, sir," he said, eager to escape the grief-choked hush, and slipped back outside.

The moment Will closed the door behind him, the man on the makeshift table stirred. A collective intake of breath echoed off the rough beams. Ruth sprang forward. "It's all right. You're safe now," she soothed, pressing a cool, damp cloth to his fevered brow. He groaned, lips parting in a faint murmur, and she repeated her gentle assurances until his ragged breathing settled. With care, Vic lifted the stranger's head and slipped the leather cord over it, letting the pouch settle against the man's chest.

Vic turned to Finn, smeared with sweat and blood. "Finn!" The boy's head snapped up, eyes clear and sharp. "Yes, sir?"

"Gather what I'll need to reach Woodhurst—a week's worth of meals, blankets, and water skins. I won't go through Talen. No witnesses." Finn sprang to his feet, urgency sharpening his movements.

"Ruth," Vic said softly, drawing his sister-in-law close to the fireplace's wan glow, "which tinctures and balms will keep him alive?" She bent to fill a woven basket with jars of salve, vials of powdered root, and swatches of clean linen as Cora moved to help her.

Meanwhile, Finn swept through the larder, yanking open cupboards and jamming crusty loaves, salted meat, and dried fruit into a rough cotton sack. He snatched Vic's bow-hunting pack from its peg and darted into Vic's and Cora's adjoining room, where the scent of lavender sachets lingered. He rummaged beneath the bed and drew out a linen-wrapped sword - Vic's old blade, its leather scabbard cracked with age. On a farm, such a weapon was never needed, but tonight it felt essential.

Bursting back into the main room, Finn skirted the central table, nearly colliding with his mother. She thrust the basket of medicines into his arms, murmuring encouragement through her tears. Vic and Cora stood by the hearth, her shoulders shaking in quiet resolve as lantern smoke curled overhead. Arms laden with provisions and tools of survival, Finn bolted for the barn.



Big Doug, the draft horse, stood just inside the barn, patiently letting Will muscle him backward into the traces of the wagon. His hooves churned mud and straw,

the enormous chestnut beast swaying with each step. Will struggled to cinch the worn leather harness around Doug's barrel chest. Will's breath came in ragged gasps as he forced the harness buckles shut.

Finn burst in through the warped barn door, almost colliding with the empty water trough. His shirt clung to his back with sweat, and his face glimmered pale in the lantern's flicker; he looked as if he'd run a mile carrying a sack of stones.

"What the hell is going on, Finn?" Will snapped, his voice trembling as he wrestled the last stubborn leather strap into place on Big Doug's collar. The echo of his shout bounced off the beams, then was swallowed by the hay and the reek of livestock.

Finn shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose as if to ward off a headache. "Uncle Vic says he needs this man gone. Now. Before those Xandonians or whoever else comes snooping around for a second look." His eyes darted to the barn's shadowy corners, as if half expecting assassins to bloom from the gloom.

Will's hands shook as he fumbled with the traces. "I said from the start we shouldn't bring him here. We should've left him where he was and told the council. They could have gone to find him. Now we're up to our necks in it." He shot Finn a look sharp enough to flay skin.

Finn bit back a retort. The urge to lash out was sudden and vivid, a flash of anger that surprised him with its heat. He forced it down, teeth grinding, and reached for the wool blanket and two empty water skins. He moved with a ferocity that was half panic, half determination, but his hands betrayed him, fumbling the simple knots on the skins.

Will glared but said nothing, instead turning his attention to the mess of harness ropes at Big Doug's flanks. The old draft horse pawed at the dirt, ears flicking at the tension in the air. "Easy, boy," Will murmured, his voice quieter now, and the horse stilled under his touch.

The barn felt smaller than usual, the walls closing in with every heartbeat. Overhead, the wind hammered at the boards and sent a bitter chill through the cracks. Finn kept working, shoulders hunched, jaw clenched tight. The urgency in his uncle's voice refused to leave his ears: It's us or them. They'll come for all of us.

He remembered the dead eyes of the last Xandonian sprawled in the ferns, the way the stranger's dagger had opened him from navel to neck, and the stink of blood and earth after. It was too late to turn back; they were in it now, whether Will liked it or not.

Finn yanked open the grain bin and filled a burlap sack with enough oats to feed Doug for a week. He hoisted it with a grunt, slamming it down into the wagon bed. The sound startled a pair of barn cats, who vanished into the hayloft with a hiss. "Vic says he'll ride straight for Woodhurst, take the old logging road

down the north slope and keep off the main trail. No stops, no backtracking. If he's lucky, no one will see him leave."

Will grunted, not looking at him. "And if he's not lucky?"

Finn's answer was a cold, humourless smile. "Then we hope Vic's a better shot than he used to be."

He wedged the sack of oats against a weathered wooden crate, then tossed in the packs and a rolled tarp. Next came the medicine basket Ruth had pressed into his arms—filled with jars of pickled roots and vials of stinking dark tincture. The wagon's floorboards creaked under the weight.

He would need rope, maybe a hatchet, and Vic's old hunting arrows. He gathered these things with grim efficiency, using the pretext of busyness to keep his mind from reeling apart at the seams. When he passed Will, the other boy's face had lost its anger, replaced by something flat and brittle. He added a battered wooden bucket for water, some spare tack wrapped in oiled cloth to keep it dry, and a thick layer of sweet-smelling hay as a bed for the wounded stranger.



The wagon wheels groaned as Finn drove it out of the barn and up to the front of the weathered farmhouse, kicking up a small cloud of dust. He engaged the iron brake with a harsh metallic clank, jumped down from the solid wooden seat, and stood at Doug's head, gently stroking the horse's broad forehead, feeling the velvet warmth beneath his fingers. Will stood beside him, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

Uncle Vic strode out onto the creaking porch, Ruth right behind him, her apron stained with blood. She was giving him rapid-fire instructions for the man's care, her voice low but urgent. Vic's weathered face was grim as he gestured to the boys to come into the house to help with moving the man.

Suddenly, they heard the sound of horses approaching from the Northwest - fast hoofbeats drumming against the packed earth, growing louder with each heartbeat.

"Get my sword out of the wagon!" Vic shouted at Finn, his voice sharp as a whip crack. "I'll get the bows," he added as he darted back inside the house, boots pounding on the wooden steps. He was back on the porch before Finn had pulled the sword from beneath the wool blankets in the back of the wagon. Vic bounded down the steps and threw a yew bow and leather quiver to Will, arrows rattling, and reached out with calloused hands to take the sword from Finn. Vic handed the other bow and quiver to Will, the weapons passing between them with practiced urgency.

"Stay in the wagon. Keep down. Don't do anything unless I tell you to," Vic ordered Finn, his voice low and deadly serious. Finn immediately strung the bow

with a swift, fluid motion and ducked down behind the rough-hewn side of the wagon, heart hammering against his ribs. Vic spun around, his cloak swirling. "Will! Get up in the barn loft. Next to the window. Stay out of sight."

Will scampered off, his shadow stretching long across the sunlit yard.

"Cora, Ruth, get in the house! Bar the door!" Vic commanded, and they hurried to obey, the heavy wooden door slamming shut behind them with a sound like the lid of a coffin coming down hard.

CHAPTER 3

BLOOD DRAWN

Will had just slipped behind the heavy, weathered plank of the barn door—its iron hinges groaning in protest—when the first mercenary rounded the corner, sun glinting off steel greaves. Will paused, heart hammering: *what in the nine bells was going on?*

He scrambled up the loft ladder, its rungs rough under his hands, fine dust dancing in the golden beams slanting through gaps in the siding. At the wide hay-drop window, he crouched on the splintered sill and nocked an arrow, bow in hand, peering down. The yard lay before him like a living diorama. Two small square pens, one with the two mercenary horses, the other empty, pressed against the barn wall. Beyond, the farmhouse rose low and whitewashed, a well with its creaking pulley just off the broad porch. To the right, a paddock held a string of work horses, tails flicking at flies in the midday haze. Beyond all that, a tree-lined creek glimmered under a canopy of emerald leaves.

In the half-shadow of the wagon—wheels crusted with dust, blankets tossed aside—Finn crouched, bow tight in his grip. Big Doug, broad-shouldered and silent as an ox, stood quietly in the traces. On the top cabin step leaned Uncle Vic, sword-point resting on the porch planking, his greying hair curling at the nape. He looked wary, but prepared.

Six riders cantered from the direction of the morning melee, skidding to a dusty halt before the porch. Their horses stamped and snorted; beads of sweat caught the light. The men fanned out across the yard but stayed mounted. One broad-shouldered fellow, taller than the rest, urged his horse forward. Sun glinted on his drawn scimitar's curve. "Good day to you, Sir," he said, voice thick with a foreign accent. Xandonian, Will decided, from his clipped vowels.

"Good day," Vic replied, tone neutral, eyes unwavering.

The leader squinted at the farmhouse and then back to Vic. "Have you by chance seen a hunter come through here? Tall, long hair, hooded cloak, short beard - and possibly bearing an arrow in his shoulder?" He inquired.

Vic's slow shake was all the answer he gave. The man snorted. "I'm not sure you're telling the truth. See, those two horses in that corral belonged to my men. They were ambushed in the hills this morning by a horse thief. How else did they get here?"

Vic shrugged. "Horses wander. Take them if you like."

A sour smile flickered across the leader's face, then his tone turned venomous. "I know Jethro is here! Hand him over, and perhaps we'll spare your sorry neck. He must be near death, poison arrow and all. Bring him to me!"

Vic only shifted, fingers tightening on his sword hilt. The mercenary leader barked an order in guttural Xandonian. Four men slid from their saddles, scimitars drawn, stepping toward the porch. Their horses stamped, bridles clinking. The leader reined his mount back.

A high-pitched female yelp echoed from inside the house. The heavy wooden door burst open. Jethro stormed out, bare-chested, muscles coiled like springs, the leather pouch swinging from his neck, and hair flying wild. He roared and plunged down the steps, sword arcing in the sunlight.

Before the mercenaries could steady themselves, Jethro slammed into the two nearest, blades clashing in a flash of steel. Uncle Vic followed suit, dropping from the porch to engage a third man in a whirl of parries and thrusts. The lead mercenary hesitated atop his horse, leather creaking under the saddle, then backed further away from the fight.

Dust swirled as Jethro and Vic moved as one—slashing, dodging, each blow ringing sharp. In the wagon, Finn rose to his feet, bow trembling in his sweat-slick palm. He scanned the fray but froze, uncertain. His fingers froze on the bowstring. Deer and rabbits were one thing - men were another. If his aim faltered even slightly, the arrow might find Uncle Vic instead.

Vic delivered a crisp thrust that sliced through the mercenary's neck just above the collarbone. Blood fountained in a crimson arc, splattering the dusty ground. The mercenary's mouth opened in a silent scream, his eyes bulging with shock as his fingers clawed uselessly at the wound. His knees buckled first, then his whole body crumpled to the dust, twitching once before going still, his scimitar landing with a dull thud beside his outstretched hand.

Before the first mercenary's body had settled in the blood-darkened dirt, Vic pivoted on his heel to face the second assailant—a wiry man with a pockmarked face and yellowed teeth bared in a snarl. Steel rang against steel as Vic parried a vicious slice aimed at his ribs, the impact jarring up his arm. He countered with a lightning thrust toward the man's heart, but the mercenary twisted away, his scimitar whistling through the air between them. They circled each other, boots scuffing in the dust, sweat gleaming on tensed muscles. The mercenary fainted left, then slashed right - but Vic anticipated the move. He sidestepped, bringing his blade down in a devastating arc that cleaved through the man's collarbone and deep into his chest cavity with a wet, splintering crack.

Jethro had felled one man already—his longsword buried deep in the mercenary's chest, blood bubbling around the wound—and whirled to face the other. The second mercenary's scimitar whistled through the air, catching Jethro across the shoulder. He staggered beneath the impact, his leather boots skidding in

the blood-slicked dirt as he rolled clear, and then sprang up with a feral scream, yanking his blade from the dead man's chest. In one fluid motion, he drove his gore-streaked blade through the gap in the man's leather breastplate. The assassin's eyes widened in shock as he wrenched himself free, stumbling backward three paces before his knees buckled and his eyes glazed over, a final rattling breath escaping his lips as he collapsed into the dust.

The fifth mercenary, who had kept his distance from the bloodshed, suddenly spotted Finn in the wagon bed with his bow and reined his mount in close from behind, sword raised high, aiming a deadly arc at Finn's legs. Up high in the hayloft, Will's breath caught; he saw the man's sinewy arm, the glint of steel. Instinct took hold. He drew back the bowstring, felt the strain in his shoulder, aligned the arrow, and released. The arrow buried itself in the mercenary's back with a dull thud. The man's grip flew loose, blade clattering to the wagon floor. He slumped from the saddle, horse whinnying in panic and shying away as its rider dropped to the ground.

Only one foe remained: the mercenary leader, still mounted, swept around Jethro, scimitar whistling. The blade sliced across Jethro's chest in a spray of red, tearing flesh from shoulder to hip. He screamed, stumbled, and then Finn's arrow struck true, splintering bone in the mercenary's skull. Both Jethro and the fallen rider hit the ground together, bodies still in the swirling dust.



All was still and quiet for what seemed like an eternity to Finn, but it was only for a moment. Uncle Vic ran the few paces to Jethro, his weathered boots kicking up small clouds of dust from the dry farmyard. He knelt down beside the man as Ruth and Cora also arrived at his side, their faces pale with shock, skirts swishing around their ankles.

Finn jumped from the back of the wagon, the wooden boards creaking beneath his weight, Finn walked quickly over to his family as Will came running out of the barn to join them, his bow still clutched in his white-knuckled grip.

Uncle Vic had Jethro's head cradled on his lap, the stranger's dark hair matted with sweat and dirt, while Ruth was trying to staunch the blood flow with her balled-up apron, now soaked through with deep scarlet. It was no use; there was too much damage. Jethro's eyelids fluttered, and he opened his dark eyes, now glazed with the approaching shadow of death. He looked around the group. "Thank you for helping me," he said quietly, his voice barely above a whisper.

Everybody just smiled weakly at him, the silence broken only by the distant call of a crow. He winced in pain, his body shuddering slightly, and then looked up directly at Finn. "It wants you, boy. Take the shard. Get it to Rafferty. Don't let them get it." Finn gawked at the dying man. Jethro drew one last deep breath, his

chest rising painfully, and died, his body going slack as the light faded from his eyes.



Finn felt a strange compulsion. He knelt down and reached for the worn leather pouch dangling from the dead man's neck, the cord-stained dark with sweat and blood. His mother's calloused fingers clamped around his wrist like a vice. "No!" she exclaimed, her face ashen beneath her sun-browned skin. Finn met her gaze, noting the fear that made her pupils contract to pinpoints.

"Ma, I have to do it."

"Finnrick Aloysious Thorburn!" Her voice cracked like a whip—she only used his full name when fury overtook her reason. "No, you don't!" she shouted, her nails digging half-moons into his flesh as she yanked him backward.

Vic lunged forward in a blur of movement, his weathered hands already working at the knot. "I'll do it!"

"No!" Aunt Cora's scream tore through the air. It was too late; Vic had already extracted the shard from its leather prison, holding the obsidian crystal up to the sunlight where it gleamed with an unnatural darkness that seemed to swallow the light around it.

Everyone froze, breath held, waiting for something—anything—to happen.

"I don't feel anything, really," Vic muttered, his brow furrowed. "In fact, it feels kind of repulsive." He shook his head, the shard trembling between his thick fingers.

Finn stepped closer. "It wants me. I can feel it pulling." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I must have it, Uncle." Finn's eyes burned with an intensity that made Vic flinch.

"No!" Ruth collapsed, her knees striking the dust with a dull thud, tears carving clean tracks down her dirt-smudged cheeks. Cora knelt beside her, enveloping her sister-in-law's shaking shoulders.

"Oh, my boy," Vic's voice caught, "this breaks my heart." Tears welled in his eyes as he extended his palm, the shard nestled in the centre like a drop of midnight.

Finn's fingers closed around the crystal. Lightning seemed to arc through his veins, a euphoric rush that turned his vision kaleidoscopic. His legs buckled, and he dropped to the ground, dust billowing around him.

"Whoa!" The word escaped him as colours intensified, sounds sharpened. Then, like a wave receding, the sensation ebbed, leaving him breathless but more clear-headed. He looked up to find every eye fixed upon him, faces etched with dread. "I think I'm ok," he managed. "I think..." he paused, feeling the crystal's presence like a second heartbeat, "it's bonded to me."

"Right, then," said Vic decisively, his sun-weathered face hardening like clay baked in summer heat. "This changes everything. Finn, you're going to have to leave, immediately. We don't know if there are more mercenaries coming." He gestured toward the paddock where Badger's chestnut coat gleamed in the afternoon light. "Take Badger. That horse has the heart of a mountain wolf tracking a buck—he'll keep going when others would falter. Once you're gone, I'll lead these corpses off through the eastern ravines for a few days. That should throw off any pursuers." His calloused fingers raked through his silver-streaked beard. "The rest of you will have to erase every trace of this fight. Run the cattle through here until the ground is nothing but churned mud. And bury Jethro deep in the forest where the pines grow thick. Finn, grab those supplies from the wagon first. Every moment counts now."

Will's freckled face paled beneath his summer tan, his fingers nervously twisting the leather cord around his wrist. The obsidian shard was just a strange piece of rock to him, but the fear in everyone's eyes told him all he needed to know.

The shock of Jethro's death vanished beneath the urgency of escape. Ruth and Cora scrambled to their feet, dust clinging to their skirts. Cora fled toward the farmhouse, returning breathless with Finn's hunting pack bulging with hastily gathered provisions. Her fingers trembled as she pressed it into his arms, her lips brushing his cheek. "Come back to us," she whispered.

Vic whistled for Badger as he ran toward his paddock while Ruth, wiping tears with her sleeve, disappeared into the shadowed barn for tack. Finn leapt into the wagon bed, sorting through his supplies with quick, decisive movements, keeping only what survival demanded.

The dead mercenaries proved heavier in death than life. Finn and Will grunted under their weight, hoisting the bodies across their mounts as Ruth and Cora whispered soothing words to the skittish horses, their nostrils flaring at the scent of blood as the boys secured the grim cargo with rope. When Vic returned with the big chestnut dancing sideways on the lead, they worked in wordless synchrony—Finn securing the bridle, Vic cinching the saddle, Will lashing supplies behind it. The burlap rasped against leather as he tightened the final knots. The time had come.

Vic, Will, Ruth, and Cora froze in the yard. Ruth dashed forward, throwing her arms around Finn's shoulders. Her tears fell onto his jacket as she whispered, "Take care, Finn. Please come back. Maybe that healer in Ainsdra can break the binding... or they'll stop hunting the shard..." Her voice trembled, trailing off in helpless hope.

"I'll be fine, Ma," Finn promised, voice firm despite the tightness in his throat. "I'll stay out of trouble."

Cora stepped forward, her work-worn hands gripping Finn's shoulders before pulling him into an embrace that smelled of woodsmoke and rosemary. Her tears dampened the collar of his shirt; each drop warm against his skin. She pulled back, her weathered face creased with worry, lips pressed tight against words that would only make the parting harder.

Will remained rooted to the spot, the blood draining from his sun-bronzed face as he twisted the leather cord around his wrist. Though he couldn't feel the shard's pull himself, the terror etched in the faces around him spoke volumes. Whatever this black stone was, it had just sentenced his best friend to exile.

"I'll be back before the corn's knee-high," Finn said, forcing confidence into his voice. Their hands clasped in the grip they'd perfected since boyhood, before pulling each other into a fierce embrace. Will, usually overflowing with jokes and chatter, couldn't summon a single word.

He crushed his mother against his chest one final time, then swung himself onto Badger's back in a single fluid motion. The chestnut pranced beneath him, nostrils flaring, already sensing their departure. Finn reined him around, taking one last look at the farmhouse that had sheltered him since birth. Uncle Vic strode alongside, gripping Finn's knee as he murmured urgent instructions.

"The creek path, upstream, the water hides tracks. When you reach the pool with those granite banks, break west, and follow the road to Cassily. Stay out of sight as much as possible. Trust no one. Find Ben's smithy there—he'll take the horses, no questions asked. I'll collect them myself before the moon turns. From the harbour, book passage to Ainsdra immediately. The open sea puts leagues between you and any pursuit." His calloused fingers pressed a worn leather purse into Finn's palm, coins clinking softly inside. "Enough for lodging, stabling, and ship's fare. Be safe, son." With a final firm pat to Finn's leg, he stepped back.

Finn's throat tightened as he nodded. He raised his hand in farewell to his mother and aunt, their figures blurring together through his unshed tears. Will stood apart from them, a solitary silhouette against the farmhouse. Digging his heels into Badger's flanks, Finn felt the powerful animal surge forward beneath him, hooves thundering toward the creek and whatever lay beyond.