

THE LAST RITE

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CHAPTER 1

KEYSTONE

Three days after the coronation, Keystone's festive aftermath faded like the memory of a fever. Dawn crept through the city as if it, too, were uncertain what kind of place it had become. The people resumed their routines, merchants set up battered stalls in the main market, and the bells at the High Temple tolled for the new king, but there was a brittleness to the new normal, a sense that everything was one wrong word from shattering. The city Watch remained a fixture throughout the city and Blueblades no longer paraded in the open, but everyone agreed you saw more of them in alleys, watching, searching.

Finn Thorburn awoke that morning with the creak of a floorboard below him and the heavy ache in his chest that had not left since the night before. He'd slept in the cramped attic alongside Will and Rae, all three of them pressed into the eaves of the little house, their breath clouding in the early spring chill. Finn could not recall the last time he'd actually slept through the night. He'd spent most of the previous night replaying the argument with his mother, Ruth, in the kitchen below. Even now he could hear her voice, as clear as if she were standing over him: "I'm not leaving you two. Forget it."

The Thorburn family—plus one Tannerson and a Rae—were quartered in a safehouse owned by one of the Guardians. The woman's name was Mrs. Hale, and she was as old as the river itself, her hair a thick, unyielding mass of white, her eyes an impossible blue. She moved about her kitchen with the force and permanence of a glacier. The place was small, the walls thick, the front lock the size of a dog's skull. The Guardians had split the shard-bearers up throughout the city, but the Thornburns had insisted on staying together. The risk of being discovered by the Blueblades was higher but they were willing to take that chance.

Will groaned and rolled over, dislodging Rae's foot from his ribs. Rae pulled her cloak tighter and glared at them both. "You snore like a dying badger, Will."

"Can't help it," Will muttered, grinning sideways at Finn. "I dream about running. Sometimes I outrun the noise."

Finn smiled and shook his head, the easy banter a relief from the tension that clung to everything these days. He sat up, bumping his head on the rafter, and peered through the cracked window. An ash-gray sky. Rain would come before midday.

Finn watched Rae stand and stretch like a cat, arms extended overhead, fingers splayed toward the low ceiling. For once, she wasn't wearing her usual five layers of clothes—just a thin linen shirt that clung to her silhouette as she arched her back. The fabric lifted slightly, revealing a sliver of pale skin above her waistband and the gentle curve of her hip. Heat rushed to his face as he quickly averted his eyes, fixing his gaze on a knothole in the floorboards, his heart drumming against his ribs like a caged bird. Rae made her way down the rickety stairs, each wooden step groaning beneath her slight weight. When her footsteps faded, Finn turned to Will.

"You've been quiet lately. Everything all right?"

Will studied the floorboards, picking at a splinter with his thumbnail. "It's just—with you and Rae growing closer, I feel like I'm intruding sometimes." He forced a smile. "Don't worry about it. I'm glad for you both."

"If there even is a 'both'," Finn muttered. "One moment she's reaching for my hand, the next she's halfway across the room if I so much as look at her."

Will's laugh was genuine this time. He clapped Finn's shoulder. "My father always said trying to understand a woman's mind is like trying to catch smoke with your bare hands. You'll only end up confused and smelling funny."

Finn leaned back against the wall, wincing as a nail caught his shirt. "I just wish my tongue didn't turn to lead every time I tried to speak to her. She must think I'm an idiot."

Will's eyes crinkled with genuine amusement. "Your love troubles will seem very small once we're dodging Blueblades again," he said, pushing himself to his feet. "Besides, an empty stomach makes for an empty head. Let's see what Mrs. Hale's got cooking."

Downstairs, the kitchen was already warm with the smell of porridge, and Mrs. Hale was thumping around the table, muttering about stubborn men and the price of barley. Ruth sat at the end of the table; her hands wrapped around a mug. She looked tired, her hair pulled back in a loose braid, the streaks of silver brighter than Finn remembered. Vic, his uncle, sat across from her, poking at a cold sausage, his face drawn. Thorn—his father, though he'd only started using the word again recently after fifteen years of absence—stood by the stove, arms crossed, watching the others with a wary intensity. Rorke stood beside the closed back door.

Will, Finn, and Rae drifted into the room with the caution of cats in unfamiliar territory.

"Morning all," Finn said, summoning what cheer he could.

"You're late," Ruth replied, but her tone was soft. She reached out and squeezed Finn's hand, and for a moment he was a boy again, before the Xandonians invaded his home and he had bonded to the obsidian shard hung around his neck.

Mrs. Hale poured tea for everyone, then vanished into the back room with the efficiency of someone who recognized family business and did not care to meddle. For a moment the only sound was the distant scratch of a broom and the tick of the clock.

Ruth set her mug down and leveled a look at Finn that could have flattened a barn. "I'm not leaving you," she said, and it was not a question.

"I know you don't want to," Finn said, eyes down. "But it's not safe here. It's not safe anywhere near us, not with the Blueblades chasing us, and the Xandonians might not be in the city, but they haven't given up the chase either."

Finn cleared his throat. "You and Uncle Vic should go back to the farm. Aunt Cora's there alone. You've been gone for what, three months?"

"I said we're not splitting up," Ruth snapped. "We're a family, and we stay together."

Will and Rae remained silent, exchanging a single glance before fixing their eyes on the wooden table. Will, normally quick with a joke, pressed his lips together and folded his hands in his lap. They both recognized the storm brewing between the Thorburns—a tempest neither outsider dared navigate. There was a silence, heavy as fog.

Thorn finally spoke, his voice low and rough. "It's not up for debate, Ruth. We talked about this before, and you agreed."

"I agreed to nothing. You two agreed what was best for me. I didn't have a say in it," Ruth shot back. "You think I'll stand by while you get yourselves killed?"

"Ma," Finn started, but Thorn shook his head and Finn sighed heavily in capitulation. There was no changing her mind.

Vic put a gentle hand on Ruth's arm. "Cora needs me," he said. "I'll go home. And I'm more than a little worried that Brack or the Xandonians might have figured out where we are from and have her locked up somewhere as leverage. I need to know she's safe."

Ruth's lip trembled, but she swallowed it down. "You're right. I didn't think about that. We need to get you back home as quickly as we can."

"Rorke, can you get a message to Elara about getting Vic back to Talen by the quickest route?" Thorn asked the Guardian.

Rorke nodded, "Any other messages?"

Thorn shook his head. "Just ask her what the plan is for getting us beyond the city walls. We need options, and soon."

Rorke gave a curt nod, then worked the heavy bolt free with practiced hands. A moment later, he was gone, the door clicking shut behind him.

#

Rafferty had always preferred to work alone, especially when the stakes involved were the kind that could split a mind in half. Even in his old life at the university, before the name shard-bearer meant anything to him, he'd found some comfort in isolation—the way it let a man think, truly think, without the

interference of other people's wants and needs. But even by those standards, he was pushing the limits of solitude. He'd chosen the most remote of the Guardians' safehouses, a squat brownstone crammed between a cobbler's and an abandoned bakery, and he'd told Elara in no uncertain terms that he should not be disturbed for anything short of the city burning down. He wasn't sure whether he meant that as a joke.

He spent the first two days hunched over the old desk in the back parlor, subsisting on stale rye and pickled onions, his only company the twin obsidian tomes and the knife-edge certainty that he was running out of time. He checked and rechecked his own notes, cross-referenced every margin scrawl, pored through the battered ledgers—then started again, certain he'd missed something. Sleep came in fits, stolen hours with his head pillowed on his arm and the taste of ink on his tongue.

On the third morning, he allowed himself a single mug of something stronger than tea and a moment to stare out the window at the empty street. The city was still locked in the strange holding pattern that had settled over it since the coronation. The news from the palace was all rumor and contradiction, and everyone Rafferty trusted had gone to ground.

He looked back at the books. They were a matched pair, the covers blacker than coal, each one small but seemingly heavy for its size. When he opened the first, it exhaled a faint scent of burnt cloves. The text wriggled on the page if you stared too long. The second, which Finn had retrieved at such a cost, was stranger still: each leaf of paper was razor-thin and bore not only words but diagrams, maps, and little mechanical drawings, some of which seemed to change shape when he returned to them later.

He had confirmed, without a shred of doubt, what the second book said: all twelve shards must be brought together at the so-called birthplace. It did not say where that place was. It only said that the answer was in a third book, and that book was to be found at the Ruins. Nothing more specific; just the Ruins, capitalized, with a symbol beside it that reminded Rafferty of an hourglass or maybe a pair of cracked spectacles.

The library's archives might hold the answer to which ruins the text referenced, but after their theft three days prior, the place would be crawling with guards. Even if he could slip past them, combing through ancient records would consume precious days—a luxury they didn't have.

He'd run through all the places he knew that could be called Ruins, and the answer was bleak. There were two that fit the bill—the Ruins of Nightfall, far to the north in the shadow of the mountains, and the Lifeless Ruins, east in the Angry Sands. Both were famously inhospitable. Both were, in their own way, tombs.

He was leaning toward Nightfall. He didn't know why.

He closed the second book, knuckles white, then flipped it open again to the page with the ritual. He'd read it so many times he could recite the notation: The last to bear the burden brings the rest to the brink and, by their own hand, makes the greater sacrifice. The "greater sacrifice" was never specified, but in every marginal note and every translation, the implication was clear. Someone would have to die. The shard-bearers were not going to come out of this whole.

Finn was the last. Finn, and only Finn, could do what needed to be done.

Elara knew—she led the Guardians and carried a shard of her own. And Finn knew, having extracted promises from them both that they would keep silent. "No need to burden the others," he'd said, with that same forced smile that never reached his eyes. And so the terrible knowledge remained trapped between the three of them like a held breath.

Rafferty sighed.

He'd been lying to Finn and the others for weeks now, ever since he'd gotten his hands on the first book. He'd told them there was a way to unbind the shards, to free the bearers, to go back to a life that had never really existed for any of them. He'd told them the books held a cure, but that was never true. He'd said what he needed to say to keep them moving, to keep them alive. He'd said what he needed to say because ending the cycle of the shards had become his life's work. Every night spent hunched over ancient texts—all of it had been in service to one goal: ensuring that no more innocents would be hunted down and butchered for the power they carried. The truth he couldn't bring himself to share was that the only way to break the shards' hold on this world was to break those who bore them.

He fumbled for the glass of whiskey and took a long swallow. The guilt, by now, was familiar—a black pebble rolling around in his gut. He didn't like lying, but he also didn't like the idea of Brack or the Xandonians getting their hands on the shards and gaining untold power - no one person should hold such sway. He hadn't survived this long by looking away from hard truths and took another swig of the hard liquor.

#

Beneath the tannery's stench, Elara and a handful of Guardians huddled in the dim light of their underground refuge. Finn scanned the room, noting the exhaustion etched into each face. Since Brack's coronation, they'd scattered like seeds in wind, drifting between safehouses, nursing wounds both seen and unseen. Now they gathered around a makeshift table, their low voices barely disturbing the dust motes that hung in the air. The time had come to decide which path to take through the closing net above.

The table in the center was little more than a warped plank laid across crates. Rae sat on an upturned bucket, her back against the cold stone wall. Will sprawled opposite, turning a mug between his hands and humming tunelessly, nerves too raw for silence. Ruth and Thorn sat side by side, shoulders touching, their hands

resting inches apart on the scarred wood. Rafferty sat, hunched over the second book, his every movement leaking impatience.

Finn circled the table and dropped beside Rae.

Elara waited until the last scrape of furniture settled. "Vic, your berth is secured on tomorrow's vessel to Woodhurst."

Relief washed over Vic's face. "My deepest thanks."

"The ship catches the midday tide," Elara continued, her voice matter-of-fact. "Three weeks across the Maleny, then two days' ride inland. You'll see your hearth before the first frost."

Finn's chest tightened at the word "hearth." He fixed his gaze on a deep gouge in the tabletop, willing the sudden ache of longing to subside before anyone noticed.

Vic nodded and Ruth reached over and squeezed his hand.

Thorn cleared his throat. "We have to split," he said. "It's the only way."

Will looked up, frowning. "Split as in—?"

"As in two groups, two directions," Rafferty said. "One draws the hunt north, the other east. Less chance of all of us being caught in one net. We have to check both ruins for the last book so we might as well send a group to each at the same time."

Finn glanced at Thorn. His father was tracing the grain of the table with a fingertip, as if reading something invisible. "Where?"

Rafferty jabbed at the map. "Ruins of Nightfall. Two weeks' ride, if the snows aren't too bad in the passes." His hand shifted to a red X on the eastern edge. "The other group heads for the Lifeless Ruins in the Angry Sands."

Ruth leaned forward, eyes tracing the map's contours. "Which path carries less risk?"

"Both are dangerous," Rafferty said, his shoulders tensing. "Brack's forces could appear anywhere. The northern passes will be choked with snow, while the eastern desert earned its name 'Angry Sands' through blood and bone."

Will kept his gaze fixed on his mug. "How do we divide ourselves, then?"

"The northern ruins," Elara said, her finger tapping the parchment. "That's where I believe we'll find the book." Her eyes flicked toward Thorn before returning to the map.

Thorn's voice emerged like gravel. "Then we take the eastern route."

"I'll take the six ex-guards with me," Elara said, then turned. "Finn?"

"I'll go east," he replied, unwilling to be separated from his father again. He glanced at Rae, question in his eyes.

After a moment's consideration, Rae nodded. "The Angry Sands it is."

"Leaving the Ruins of Nightfall to me," Will said with a forced smile.

Finn returned the expression, though dread pooled in his gut. His closest friend would travel a different path. "Since when do you like snow?"

"Since I discovered I despise sand even more," Will replied.

Rafferty's knife scratched across the parchment, carving two paths. "I'd wager on Nightfall myself. I'll accompany Elara north." He tapped the blade's tip against the map. "We need a meeting place for whoever finds the book."

"Cardmore's eastern pass," Elara suggested, her finger landing on the spot. "Remote enough from Keystone and any settlements of note. Equidistant from both ruins."

Heads bobbed in silent consensus around the table.

Finn cleared his throat. "And the bearers we rescued—how are they faring? Well enough to join us?"

Elara's expression darkened. "Their wounds have barely closed. The shards accelerate healing, yes, but even magic has limits." She shook her head. "They'd never survive the journey with Blueblades hunting us. Better they remain hidden until stronger, then meet us at the pass when safe."

Ruth's eyes narrowed. "And what of the texts we already possess?"

With practiced caution, Rafferty extracted both volumes from inside his coat and placed them on the weathered wood.

"We must separate them," Elara said, her voice hardening. "Should you fall into their hands with both, Rafferty, we lose everything."

Without argument, Rafferty slid the first tome toward Ruth. Her fingers hovered momentarily before claiming it, palm gliding across the ancient binding.

As she opened it, her breath caught. "These markings," she murmured, barely audible. "My grandmother's healing book shared these symbols." Her fingertip traced a particular character. "This signifies connection... binding things together."

Rafferty's expression tightened, a flicker of unease crossing his features.

Thorn observed the exchange, his stillness belying his attention. "The matter of escaping the city remains."

A rare smile crossed Elara's face. "I've spent the last three days securing our exit. By morning, all will be arranged. I've already sent horses and supplies ahead to a farmhouse near the bridge. That will be our rally point. This is our final gathering here. I'll deliver instructions later to each safehouse personally. You'll depart tomorrow in ones or twos, staggered times, different gates. Until then, remain hidden."

One by one, they rose from the makeshift table, carrying both possibility and dread on their shoulders as they slipped back upstairs to the bustling city streets.

CHAPTER 2

SHARDBEARERS

ASSEMBLE

Finn Thorburn had learned to judge hours by the shape of city sounds. Before dawn, Keystone ticked with anxiety—a woodblock pulse in the gutters, rats scuttling about the empty market for scraps, the hush when only the bakers were awake. At the North Gate, the rhythm changed. Blueblade boots hammered out a martial tattoo, slow and certain. Every third step, a lantern bobbed, tracing patterns on the frost-slick stones.

He crouched behind the east wall, knees numb, shoulder pressed so hard into the brick his pulse vibrated up the mortar. The parapet above cast a wedge of shadow, enough to hide him if he kept still. Every muscle in his thighs throbbed, every breath threatened to show as steam. He counted: six guards in rotation, two above, four below. Every pass, the guardsman on the left fiddled with his collar, tugging it loose as he rounded the turn. If the Watch was bored, the Blueblades were the opposite. These men and women watched for trouble the way hounds watched for a thrown bone.

Ten paces ahead, Elara knelt by a merchant's wagon, face hidden beneath a scarf. She had the look of a washerwoman come early to haggle for flour, but her fingers moved with the precision of a locksmith: twist, press, pause. Under the wagon's axle, Thorn—hulking, too big for concealment—crawled in the mud. The trick was a false belly under the wagon, a wooden compartment with air holes and nothing but pitch-black space. Elara whispered a command; Thorn nodded, set his jaw, and slid himself under. Finn heard the trapdoor's click just as the guard's lantern passed overhead, splashing gold across the puddles. He held his breath. The beam missed Thorn's boots by a handspan as the driver, Rorke, urged his horses forward.

On the next circuit, Elara pulled away, her role as invisible as the dawn. She walked straight past Finn, never turning her head, but dropped a thin coil of rope at his boot and whispered, "Window to the right of the gatehouse," she murmured, breath barely a whisper. "North side, two stories. Wait for the change."

Finn nodded. His tongue stuck to his teeth. He watched her go, counting her steps as she vanished around the buttress.

He looped the cord around his wrist and eyed the climb. The mortar was old, crumbling in spots, but the ledges had been worn smooth by a century of hands. He wiped his palms on his coat, felt the skin sting, and set his foot to the first crack.

The wall bit back, hard. Every fingerhold threatened to give, and halfway up, his boot slipped, sending a pebble tumbling to the ground. He froze, heart hammering. Below, the Blueblade on patrol stopped, looked left, then right. Finn pressed his cheek against the stone, tried to be mortar. The guard moved on.

Sweat burned his eyes. By the time he reached the window ledge, his arms shook. He ducked behind a frost-caked shutter and eased it open with his knife, working the latch slow. Inside was a store-room—empty, except for a single iron-banded chest and a mess of discarded uniforms. Finn scanned the room, then crouched low and listened.

The change came at the hour. The gates would open now. Bells from the far end of the city, then a stomp of footsteps as the off-duty guards shuffled out. The window faced north, toward the gatehouse and the line of merchant wagons queued for inspection. Finn peered over the sill and saw the wagon that Thorn hid in making its way to join the line.

He scanned the approach road. Midway down, Rae waited astride a battered piebald horse, cloak drawn over her head. She hunched her shoulders and kept her gaze on the ground, playing the part of a scolded apprentice. In front of her, the guards interrogated her master, a wine merchant.

Finn's cue came when Elara walked past the line of wagons again, this time pushing a battered wheelbarrow. She nodded once at Rae, then angled toward the gate. Finn understood: distraction, then move.

He fumbled with the rope, tied one end to the shutter hinge, and dropped the rest outside. It uncoiled in the air, the end brushing the packed dirt below. Finn took a single breath and swung himself out, legs scrabbling for grip.

For an instant, he was certain he'd fall. His hands slipped, nails catching on the cord's strange, sticky coating. Then he steadied, found a rhythm, and lowered himself—foot by foot—between the wall and the side of the gatehouse.

At the bottom, he flattened himself against the wall and waited in the shadows.

As the third wagon creaked through the postern gate, Finn slipped from the shadows and matched its pace, his stride casual and purposeful. His ears strained for shouts of discovery, but the guards' attention had fixed elsewhere—on Elara and her upended wheelbarrow, where turnips and onions tumbled across the cobblestones amid a chorus of curses.

He turned just in time to see Rae at the postern gate, presenting her papers. The Blueblade on duty eyed her, then the horse, then the papers. He frowned, lips moving as he read. Finn's breath caught.

The guard snorted. "Move along." He handed the papers back, and with a grunt, waved her through.

Rae rode on, never looking back.

Finn's shoulders unclenched.

He followed the road north, eyes on the horizon, but every sense bent backward, listening for shouts, hoofbeats, the ring of alarm bells. Instead, only the sound of his own boots, the rattle of wagons, the whisper of wind, and the faint smell of woodsmoke from the villages ahead.

At the next crossroads, Finn ducked down a side lane, just as Elara had drawn it on the map. The safehouse was there: a derelict shop, sign fallen, windows shuttered.

The door swung open, and there stood Rae in her travel-worn clothes. She pressed a steaming mug into Finn's hands—something bitter, probably tea, but it scorched his throat in just the right way.

"We made it," she said softly.

Finn exhaled, relief washing over him—not just for himself but to know Rae was safe. She gave him a sly wink, and he couldn't help but grin.

"What?" she teased.

"Nothing," he replied after a pause. "It's just... if I didn't know any better, I'd say you enjoyed yourself."

"Well, maybe I did," she shot back, that same devilish smile dancing on her lips.

#

Rafferty had once believed in the sanctity of the city gates—centuries-old iron, unbreachable in their severity, built as if the world outside might one day conspire to overrun all that mattered within. Now, shuffling toward the West Gate just after dawn, he saw it for what it was: an open sore leaking its secrets by the bucketful, every crack and loophole a confession written in stone.

He wore the threadbare rags Elara had procured for him. A tunic the color of dishwater, too short at the wrists, hung over leggings patched at both knees and again at the crotch. A battered satchel, crusted with old grime and unidentifiable stains, slung crosswise from his right shoulder, the second book resting in his coat pocket. The disguise was perfect. Nobody met his eyes, nobody paused to consider that a man with hands stained like nicotine and boots split at the toes could be anything but another piece of city flotsam.

The Blueblades at the gate barely looked up as he approached. One swatted a gnat, another yawned into a chapped fist. The third—a woman with her nose broken at least twice—just jerked her chin at him, grunting, "Don't come back, drunk."

He nodded, ducked his head, and hunched through the postern door, the cold bite of morning instantly sharper on the far side of the wall. They'd expected him to stumble, and so he stumbled. He made it three paces before slipping, the book nearly tumbling from his pocket; he caught it and kept going, eyes on the muddy rut that wound around the outer bastion and down toward the shantytown assembled in the shadow of the old aqueduct.

He hadn't known, until now, how many people lived in the margins of the city. The authorities called it a temporary camp, as if the hundreds who shivered in its endless rows of ash-gray canvas and scrap wood had only ever intended to pass through. The truth was the camp had its own rhythm—different than Keystone, but no less relentless. The sound was a new one: the creak of rope under constant strain, the muffled thud of boots in churned mud, the frantic laughter of children so cold their voices barely carried above the wind. Somewhere nearby, a brass spoon clanged on a mess tin, punctuating the low drone of haggling, squabbling, the persistent wet cough of the consumptive.

He passed three children clustered around a half-lit brazier. The tallest, a boy whose ears stuck out at right angles, jabbed a stick into the coals and then traced lines in the mud, sketching battlefields or city walls or maybe just a way out. The two smaller ones—twin girls with matching scars over their left eyes—watched him with the detached curiosity of cats sizing up a rat. He kept his hands in view and his stride even, making himself so unmemorable he might as well be smoke.

Two rows deeper into the camp, the tents grew more permanent, the wind-breaks fortified with tar-soaked canvas, the walkways edged by ditches meant to keep back the mud. He could hear voices now, clear and specific: a woman cursing at a jammed clasp, a man singing to himself in a language foreign to Keystone, the angry yelp of a dog as its tail was stepped on. He breathed it all in, letting the squalor and the sadness and the desperate, bright flickers of life settle on his skin.

Near the southern end of the camp, a cluster of men huddled beneath an awning fashioned from the canopy of a broken cart. They played cards for what looked like peeled potatoes, the oldest among them shuffling with a dexterity that belied his trembling hands. Rafferty's passing drew a glance, but not the kind that led to questions. They looked at him and saw a man already beaten, then went back to their game.

A turn in the path led to the outer road, gravelled and raised above the worst of the mud. He clambered up, boots slipping on the wet stones, and found himself at the edge of the world he'd always known: Keystone shrinking behind, the camp fading, and the road ahead twisting out of sight, as empty and unpromising as a river in drought.

He set off northeast - towards the safehouse. For a while, his thoughts drifted: to the Ruins of Nightfall, to Finn and Rae and Ruth and the others, to the man he'd been before all this.

He didn't let himself hope. He walked on, book pressed tight to his side, the city behind him, and the future as wide as the sky.

#

Just past midmorning, Ruth Thorburn found herself wishing for rain. Not the sentimental kind, not a gentle rinse or a comforting drizzle, but a sheet of water dense enough to wash away the city's tension, to blur the hard-edged suspicions of every guard who watched the gates. Instead, Keystone pressed in under a sky

the color of old pewter, its clouds refusing both release and relief. She rolled her shoulders beneath the cloak—already damp from the persistent mist—and kept her eyes fixed forward, refusing to acknowledge the bite of wind against her cheeks or the way her hands trembled on the reins.

The North Gate boiled with traffic, all of it surlier than usual: wagons loaded with sacks of root vegetables or firewood, merchants bellowing at one another about the finer points of bribe versus toll, the city Watch and Blueblades clustering together in overlapping knots, each trying to assert authority by volume alone. She felt Will's presence at her side before she saw him, his body language loud as ever despite his best efforts at discretion.

"They've doubled the men on the wall," Will murmured, glancing up at the watchtower. "And they're cross-checking every pass slip." He nodded toward a pair of Blueblades arguing with a peddler, the latter waving a document so frayed it might have been written on a strip of bark.

Ruth smiled, or tried. "Good thing we have ours in order, then," she said, adjusting the bundle tucked beneath her cloak—one part Will's own forged pass, one part the battered first book, one part her best and last collection of healer's salves. The flask of birchbark tea she'd brewed for the trip nestled in there too, still warm against her ribs.

Will nudged his mount forward, his posture careful: not too quick, not too slow. Ruth followed suit, easing her own horse alongside. The animal—a bay gelding with an anxious twitch to its ears—snorted in protest as a cluster of children darted in front, but she steadied it with a low "Easy, lad," and a gentle nudge from her knee.

The queue to exit the city had tripled in length since sunrise. At the checkpoint, two Watchmen scrutinized each traveler; above, on the rampart, a Blueblade lieutenant leaned out, scanning faces and jotting notes in a ledger so new the leather still shone.

Will muttered under his breath, "Would have been easier to dress as a nun. Less attention."

"They'd have checked under the habit," Ruth replied, just loud enough for him to hear. "Trust me."

The man ahead of them—a farmer, probably from the look of his boots—was detained for five whole minutes, every crate in his wagon poked through, even the hay for the livestock prodded and patted down. He tried to protest, but the guards had no patience for outbursts, and the resulting scuffle ended with a bloody nose and a warning. The Blueblade up top scribbled something, then pointed directly at Ruth and Will.

Ruth straightened her posture, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "Your turn," she said, and guided her horse forward with a confidence she wished she actually felt.

The Watchman at the gate—a boy, really, with a pale beard and hands pinked raw by the cold—reached for Will’s papers. Will handed them over, face blank. The guard read them, then looked up, eyes squinting with skepticism.

“Heading north?” the guard said. “Most folk are headed east these days. Trade’s better. Fewer wolves.”

Will nodded. “Family in Coldwater. Sick mother.”

Ruth let her voice go gentle. “We’re hoping to bring her some remedies. A simple visit, nothing more.”

The Watchman’s gaze flicked to Ruth, to the bulge beneath her cloak. “And you?”

She drew the old healer’s license from her bundle—an artifact from her own grandmother, slightly altered by Elara’s hand to match Ruth’s face—and offered it up. “Healer,” she said. “Approved by city registry. I can recite the Code of Salves if you like.”

The Watchman blinked, uncertain. Above, the Blueblade lieutenant scowled, then waved his hand, a signal Ruth couldn’t quite read. The Watchman glanced up, then back at the papers, then at Ruth’s face again.

“Open the cloak,” he said. “Just the outer layer.”

Ruth complied, slow and steady. The pass, the healer’s license, the small book, and the rows of corked vials—everything visible and in perfect, boring order. She kept her hand on the bundle, letting the vials clink just enough to sound reassuring.

The Watchman nodded, scribbled a note, and handed the papers back. “Don’t linger on the roads. Bad weather up north.” He stepped aside, and with a stiff nod, motioned them through.

They passed under the portcullis, hoofbeats echoing on the slick stone. The air outside was colder, wetter, but the tension eased with every step into open space. Beyond the gate, a slope of churned mud and scattered straw funneled travelers onto the highroad; the wind carried the scent of wet earth and, faintly, the mixed odors of the city, somewhere far behind.

Will exhaled, shoulders dropping. “Was that as close as it looked?”

“Closer,” Ruth said, pulling her cloak back around her. She fingered the book through the fabric, reassured by its solid weight. “But the less interesting we look, the better.”

“Is it safe?” Will jerked his chin at her bundle.

She patted it, then the satchel of salves. “Safer than it was in the city. And if anyone asks, it’s an herb manual. The kind they sell to widows with too much time and too little patience for doctors.”

Will grunted approval. He flicked the reins, nudging his horse to match Ruth’s pace. The horses moved side by side, their breaths clouding in the morning air.

They rode on, hoofbeats steady. The city noise faded behind, replaced by the intermittent shrieks of crows perched on the leafless hedgerow and the distant

bark of dogs on the wind. The road twisted north, then split at the foot of a low, shivering hill. The narrower track, rutted and tangled with roots, was the one Elara had marked on the map. Ruth guided her horse onto it, Will following without hesitation.

The climb was slow. At the crest, she turned in the saddle, the city's skyline a bruised grey in the distance, the Watch towers just visible above the city wall. She thought of Finn and Thorn, of the others, hopefully waiting for them in the next village.

They started down the far side of the hill; the road pinched between groaning oaks and the skeletons of old stone walls. Ruth let out a slow breath and allowed herself, for the first time all morning, to believe in the possibility of escape.

She touched the book again, tracing the embossed design on its spine, then looked ahead: to the next bend, the next horizon, the next improbable act of hope.

And when the wind shifted, it brought not just the tang of cold stone and earth, but the faintest, sweetest trace of something flowering. She closed her eyes, memorizing the smell, and rode on.

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Finn flinched at every creak of the floorboards, every whisper of wind against the shutters. Each sound might herald a friend's arrival—or a Blueblade's sword. The abandoned shop felt exposed despite its peeling walls and boarded windows. Only Rae had joined him so far, her presence both a comfort and a reminder of how many were still missing. He understood the plan: staggered arrivals, different paths to avoid detection. Still, as minutes stretched to hours, his imagination conjured his parents in chains, his best friend bleeding in some alley. The waiting was unbearable—each moment another opportunity for disaster.

Then, Thorn's merchant wagon rattled to a halt with a judder behind the old shop. Rorke hopped down from the driver's seat, popped open the rear compartment, and helped Thorn out. Thorn stretched, winced, then ducked through the door, visibly grateful for walls and cover.

Inside, the safehouse reeked faintly of mold and sawdust. Bundles of spare clothes, oilcloth-wrapped supplies, and folded maps were stacked against the walls. Rae slid the shutters closed, double-checked the latch, and gave Finn a nod.

"So far, so good," she said.

Thorn began pacing the cramped room, watching the door—waiting for Ruth. An hour later, Ruth and Will slipped in without incident; they'd had no trouble passing the gate but chosen a winding route to reach this building. Relief flickered across Thorn's face, mirrored in Finn's.

A couple of hours later, Rafferty trudged in. He had made the journey completely on foot and from the furthest gate. He looked exhausted and promptly sat down. Ruth passed him a cup of the bitter tea which he drank quickly. Elara arrived last, wheeling her barrow piled high with vegetables. They'd all reached the first safehouse outside the city walls, but did the others?

Shadows lengthened across the floor when the door creaked open, admitting a girl no older than fifteen with mud-splattered boots and windburned cheeks. "They're safe," she gasped between breaths, leaning against the doorframe. "All the bearers, all the Guardians—reached the safehouses north of the city." She fumbled with her collar, producing a scrap of paper. "And Vic's ship caught the midday tide for Woodhurst." At this, the Thorburns exchanged glances, their tense shoulders finally easing as they absorbed the news that their kin was beyond the Blueblades' reach.

"All right," Elara said, shouldering her rucksack. "We're set for phase two. We're off to meet the rest of my group—there's horses waiting nearby. Tomorrow, cross the bridge separately when it's busiest. Thorn, you'll need the wagon again." Thorn and Rorke both nodded.

Will extended his hand toward Finn, who clasped it briefly before pulling him into an embrace.

"Try not to need rescuing while I'm gone," Will murmured, the lightness in his voice belying the tension in his shoulders.

"I was about to tell you the same," Finn replied. Their eyes held for a heartbeat before Will turned to Rae, sweeping her up in a sudden, lifting hug that drew a startled sound from her throat. Her palm connected with his shoulder in playful rebuke.

"Put me down, you incorrigible flirt," she said, though when her feet touched ground again, she leaned close. "Watch yourself out there." Will acknowledged this with a slight nod, then offered brief farewells to Thorn and Ruth before joining Elara by the exit.

Rafferty, saying nothing, fell into step behind him, already pulling his hood over his head.

"Good luck," Elara called, and each of them echoed the sentiment before they slipped out into the fading light without looking back.

This was how it began, Finn thought: not with a battle cry or a grand charge, but with patience, loyal allies, and the willingness to get your hands dirty - risking everything on the people you trusted most.

They'd made it out of the city. For the first time in a long while, Finn believed they might actually go somewhere. He poured himself another cup and watched the last glow of dusk fade away.