

## 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 Haydan, a modest village straddling the main road that ran east–west between the coastal city of Cassily and the trading post 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, Haydan had grown into a bustling way point. 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 waterwheel 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.

About fifty families lived here, their cottages and trimmed gardens pressed close to the road, while another fifty worked farms in the emerald hills beyond, coming in weekly to swap news, sell crisp vegetables and creamy milk, or buy nails and cloth. By anyone's measure, Haydan was no hamlet—it pulsed with trade, and if traffic between Cassily and Woodhurst kept swelling, it would soon earn the title of town.

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, 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 Haydan'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.

"Haydan." 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 Haydan. 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.