

CHAPTER 1

FUGITIVES IN MOTLEY

For four days, the carnival troupe sheltered the fugitives amongst their tents and wagons on the flatlands beyond Ainsdra's walls. Makeshift tents and lean-tos dotted the flatlands around them, a ragtag village of travelers, merchants too poor for guild fees, and those with reasons to avoid the Blueblades who patrolled within Ainsdra's walls.

Despite the proximity to the Karig and Westwend ranges, summer's peak brought merciful warmth to their hideaway. Will's wound mended slowly, his restlessness growing with each passing hour of the confinement Zora had mandated. Twice the Blueblades prowled through their encampment, their eyes sliding past the strangers in carnival garb without recognition.

Raelyn took to carnival life like she'd been born to it—flinging knives with deadly accuracy one hour, juggling apples the next, her skills drawing smiles from even the most weathered performers. Rafferty, when not demonstrating his surprisingly nimble sleight of hand, sequestered himself with the tome they'd liberated from Ainsdra's Great Library.

Finn alone remained apart, mechanically practicing archery without joy, then losing himself in the mundane tasks of camp maintenance and horse-tending. His silence extended even to Will, as his thoughts continually returned to his father and the likelihood that he was either captured or dead. The memory of that day in Ainsdra haunted him like a persistent shadow—the stolen book, the pursuit through narrow streets, and his father's face in that final moment. Thorn's command still echoed in his ears: "Run!" Even as he obeyed, something inside him had fractured. The question gnawed at him with every heartbeat: if he had refused that order and stood his ground beside Thorn, would they both be here now?

He also thought of Badger, left behind at the city stables. The horse was beyond reach now, and any attempt at retrieval would mean capture or worse. He just hoped that the stable owner would treat him well and find him a good home when Finn didn't return to claim him. Yet, he couldn't help but feel guilt that he had abandoned his uncle's favorite horse.

Dawn broke as the carnival troupe struck camp on the fifth day, their wagons forming a serpentine line toward the Notta Pass. The Karig Mountains loomed

ahead, promising cooler air but no snow at this time of year. Their route was well-planned as they traveled it every year: first to Huxdon, nestled on the eastern slopes beyond the pass, then onward to Newhaven's smaller markets, with the capital of Keystone, still two months distant, as their final destination. Between these anchoring cities lay scattered villages where they would unfurl their patchwork tents, raise their painted platforms, and transform dusty commons into theaters of wonder twice daily, collecting coin and provisions before vanishing again into the wilderness.

Each day had a shape to it: rigging the tents in the rutted earth at last light after tending to the horses. Zora's troupe ran on constant motion and exhaustion, like a team of old draft horses. Everyone pitched in, regardless of glamour or rank. Even the "Bearded Lady" doubled as seamstress and cook, her beard gone by breakfast but her cornbread legendary.

The Tyne River appeared on their fourth day of travel. The crossing consumed the entire afternoon, wagons queuing one by one for the weathered ferry. Finn's knuckles whitened around the splintered railing as the current pulled them across. When they'd last traversed these waters it had been with his father. Now Finn stared at that distant bank, feeling the emptiness inside him like a physical wound.

The ferry deposited them on the far bank by late afternoon, and they paraded through town with practiced fanfare—barkers hollering promises of wonder, and acrobats performing handsprings alongside the wagons. By dusk, their colorful tents bloomed across the common like strange flowers. Finn hammered stakes while Rae, disguised as a carnival boy in patched breeches and a cap pulled low, darted between tasks with restless energy. When the crowds gathered, she assisted the knife thrower, her slender arms a blur as she sent blades thudding into wooden targets. Finn demonstrated his archery nearby, each arrow finding its mark with mechanical precision, his face never betraying the turmoil beneath.

The evening show unfolded in its familiar rhythm: the bearded lady's bawdy songs drawing gasps and laughter, twin acrobats spinning through impossible configurations above the crowd, the strongman hoisting impossible weights. A sword swallower and fire-eater worked in tandem, their dangerous ballet punctuated by the antics of two clowns who battered each other with padded clubs to uproarious delight. Madame Zora had forbidden Rae from mingling with the audience—a precaution against her notorious light fingers finding their way into strangers' purses. She'd scowled at the restriction but didn't argue; they couldn't afford unwanted attention from the town guard, not with so many eyes already searching for them.

They spent three uneasy days in Waycross, every approaching footstep setting them on edge. Groups of armed men—some in royal colors, others bearing the unmistakable gear of Xandonian sellswords—passed through the village square. Each time, Finn and the others exchanged glances that needed no words: the hunt

continued. When they finally loaded the wagons and pointed them toward the mountain pass, Finn felt his first breath of relief in days.

As they climbed the winding road north-west of Waycross the weather changed significantly. The caravan moved through the mountains like a parade of ghosts, with wagons shrouded in tarpaulins slick with rime, and bright flags lashed by the wind. Finn sat at the front of a wagon with his chin tucked into his collar against the chill. The horses' hooves struck hardpan in a slow, even rhythm, but every few minutes the wind caught a frayed edge on the canvas domes behind them, and the whole line of wagons groaned like a funeral procession.

He shared the wagon seat with Con, the driver. Rae perched on the seat beside him, boots up on the dash, working a sliver of wood into the shape of a fox. She hadn't changed out of the circus boy's costume they'd used to leave the outskirts of Waycross—gaudy red breeches, and the sleeves of her shirt rolled to the elbows. Her hands were stained with something black and sticky from the carnival's dye shop, and she kept picking at the cuticle of her thumb with the tip of the whittling knife. Rae occasionally swore at a knot in the wood or a splinter that drew blood. Will rode in the back, laid out on a pile of furs and old banners, his shoulder bandaged.

Will's wound had mended enough that he'd taken to lounging near the costume wagon whenever they stopped, where he'd catch the acrobat girls during their breaks. One evening, Finn overheard Rae hissing at him about the unwritten rules of troupe life—how every man in the carnival considered himself guardian to the women performers, ready to break fingers over merely a misplaced compliment. Will had flashed that easy smile of his, but Finn noticed he kept a more respectful distance afterward, limiting himself to harmless banter from across the campfire.

Somewhere behind them, the music started up: a hammered dulcimer and a pair of pennywhistles in a tune Finn half-remembered from Talen's spring festival. It sounded wrong in the cold, thin air, perhaps shriller, or desperate.

"Don't know why they bother," Rae said. "Anyone out here to listen is either a sheep or a bandit."

Finn squinted at the ridgeline ahead. "Bandits would be better than what's chasing us."

Rae flexed her hands, then sheathed the knife with a quick snap. She finally glanced at him sidelong; her amber-flecked eyes narrowed against the wind. "You think he's dead, don't you."

He didn't answer. The question didn't require it.

Rae put the carved fox into one of her large pockets, its head oversized and blank-eyed, its body barely whittled from the raw. "He might not be."

Finn tucked his hands deeper into his armpits.

They rode for another hour in silence. The air took on a yellow cast as afternoon waned, but the chill deepened until Finn's jaw ached from clenching it.

A rider appeared on the ridge—a silhouette against the powder sky, before they disappeared. Finn’s heart stuttered.

Rae saw it too. She tensed, her body coiling tight as if she could spring up into the mountains. “Local? Or...?”

“Didn’t look local.”

Rae snorted. “Yeah, the locals don’t bother with shadow games. They’d just ride up and ask for a toll.”

They made camp at dusk in a sparse copse of black pine above the main road with Madame Zora overseeing the set up. The carnival folk formed their circle as ritual, every wagon in its ordained spot, while two grizzled hands and a girl with a harelip set about digging the cooking pit for the bearded lady to start on the evening meal.

Finn went to help with the horses, grateful for the work. Their quiet demeanor offered a kind of comfort he couldn’t find in people. He’d just finished rubbing down a black mare when Will strolled over.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Will said. He was pale, and instead of the old mischief in his eyes, for once, he looked serious.

Finn grunted.

Will continued, “He’s not dead, you know. Your father. He’s a tough one.”

Finn’s hands curled into the mare’s mane. Words refused to form as a lump appeared in his throat. He just nodded.

Will’s mouth quirked. “What a mess we’ve gotten into, eh?” He gestured toward the fire, where Rae was now haranguing the sword swallower in a shouting match over the ownership of a flask.

Will thumped him on the shoulder. “Go eat before the old witch feeds your share to the dogs.”

By the time Finn wandered over, the stew was already ladled out—heaps of cabbage, a scrap of fatback, and something chewy that might have been rabbit. Rae sat cross-legged, wolfing her portion with both hands, eyes darting from the fire to the shadows at the circle’s edge. Rafferty was nowhere to be seen, and Finn felt a hollow relief that the old man’s lectures would not haunt tonight’s meal.

Rae elbowed a space beside her. “Sit,” she said. “Before Zora makes you juggle torches for supper.”

He sat. The stew tasted like somewhat bland, but it was hot, and that was something.

They watched the flames for a while, Rae scraping her bowl clean.

At last, she said, “You think you killed him, don’t you? Your father.”

He stared into the fire until the colors bled, orange and blue and purple. “He stood his ground against the Xandonians and Blueblades for me.”

Rae tossed the stick into the flames. “He saved us,” she said. “None of this is your fault. It was his decision to make.”

She let that hang, then added, "I know you don't want to talk about it. Fine. But if you ever do, I'm here." She made a face. "Don't make it weird."

He looked at her, really looked, and saw the shadow of the street kid she'd been, all sharp edges and hunger. But there was something else now—a faint, untrained loyalty.

"Thanks," he said, surprising himself.

Rae shrugged, but he saw the relief in her shoulders.

"Hey," she said, "after we sort this lot out with the shards in Keystone, think you'll go home? Or settle down, grow a beard, marry one of Zora's strong-ladies?"

He didn't know how to answer. He couldn't think that far ahead.

Rae smiled crookedly. "Maybe I'll join you or open a bakery with Will. We'd last a *week* before burning the place down."

He almost smiled, and it felt like stepping on a splinter of joy.

The rest of the troupe began to drift off, parents shooing children into the wagons, and Madame Zora snuffing out lanterns one by one. The night air grew bitter, and Finn thought of the stranger on the ridge, the silent signal that they were still prey.

He lay down in the back of the wagon with Will and Con and listened to the night settle around them. There would be no sleep. But for the first time since Ainsdra, he didn't mind the company of ghosts so much.



By the second week on the road, Finn noticed a change in Rafferty. The old man kept mostly to his own wagon now—a paint-chipped circus cart crammed between the fortune-teller's tent and the "World's Shortest Mule." No matter the hour, a thin trail of blue smoke curled from the cart's crooked little chimney, and the shadow of candlelight glowed long after the rest of the carnival had gone dark.

After the day's trek the troupe gathered around a fire to smoke pipes and drink bitter homebrew from dented tin mugs. The fire's glow masked fatigue and washed the lines from their faces, and the talk became rough, honest, sometimes even kind. Finn learned more about humanity in those circles than from a decade of horse fairs in Talen. He learned how the little man with the dog show spent his earnings every night on letters to a daughter who'd disowned him. How the contortionist's father was a magistrate, and she was running from an arranged marriage in the capital. How Zora herself had once been a castle fortune teller, and had fled in the night when her predictions turned sour and true.

At breakfast, Rae slid Finn a bowl of porridge and jerked her chin toward the alchemist's lair. "He's at it again," she said. "Heard him muttering half the night. Sounded like a drowning cat."

Finn scooped the porridge, forcing it down by habit rather than hunger. "What's he working on?"

Rae raised an eyebrow. "The book, idiot." She lowered her voice. "Suppose you should be glad he's obsessed. Means he's not hovering over us anymore."

Finn glanced at the wagon. He hadn't seen much of the old man, aside from the rare mealtime when Rafferty would emerge, squinting and pale as a grub, to pluck bread and cheese with trembling fingers before disappearing again.

That night, after the camp quieted and the rest of the troupe drifted to sleep, Finn crept toward the wagon. The door hung slightly ajar, leaking a sliver of orange light onto the frozen grass. He tapped once on the backboard, then let himself in through the canvas flap.

The air inside was hot and thick with the stink of boiled onions, candle wax, and something bitter that burned Finn's nose. Rafferty hunched over a small battered desk, sleeves rolled to the elbow, ink stains running all the way up to his knobby wrists. The black tome—the one they'd nearly died retrieving—lay open in front of him, bristling with ragged paper scraps. Rafferty's lips moved as he read, tongue darting out to taste each word.

He didn't look up. "If you're here to kill me, kindly wait until I've finished this page."

Finn closed the door, careful not to rattle the hinges. "Just wanted to see how you were doing."

Rafferty made a sour face. "Better than you, boy." He jabbed at the open book. "If Brack had gotten his hands on this, well..."

"Who is Brack? Was he the man in black with the Blueblades?"

Rafferty's eyes remained fixed on the pages, his quill never pausing. "Drevan Brack. King's nephew. Spymaster. His father lords over Ainsdra, but the son's fingers reach deeper into the realm than most realize." He dipped his quill, the ink black as pitch. "A mind like a steel trap and twice as merciless. Had he caught us..." The old man's voice trailed off.

Finn's throat tightened. The wound still raw, still bleeding. Rafferty scribbled on, oblivious to the damage his words had inflicted.

Finn studied the mess of notes on the table, some written in a tidy, slanted hand, others scrawled in red or black as if written in a fit of rage. Rafferty's handwriting varied from line to line, sometimes within the same word.

"What's it say?" Finn asked. "Any of it make sense?"

Rafferty barked a laugh. "Sense? Some. Every fourth word could be an anagram for 'death,' and the footnotes are mostly recipes for poison." He leafed backward, exposing pages covered in ink blots and jagged marginalia. "But there are pieces. Pieces I recognize. Symbols I saw before the king's purge, when they used to let men like me in the castle library."

Finn frowned. "Anything about the shards?"

Rafferty's hands twitched. "Everything is about the shards, these days." He tapped a diagram: a circle divided into twelve, each segment marked with a glyph.

He turned a page, then hesitated. "There's something else. A pattern. I'm not ready to say, not until I'm sure. I think the shards want to be together."

Finn shivered, "You think they'll find each other?"

Rafferty nodded, hair bouncing in greasy curls. "Or like wolves drawn to blood." He closed the book with a wet slap.



The next morning, Finn noticed a figurative change in the air. He caught it first as a thread of unease woven through the usual bickering at breakfast. Zora's usually bright eyes flicked to the horizon every few seconds, as if expecting the hills to start spitting out wolves. The strongman went quiet, only muttering to himself while splitting wood with an axe that looked more weapon than tool. Rae, who had taken to playing cards with the twins from the acrobatic act, kept glancing over her shoulder.

"Something's on the wind," Zora said to the group at midday, as they broke for a meal of bread and cheese. She didn't elaborate, and no one pressed her.

That afternoon, a man wandered into camp. He was a scarecrow of a man in a moth-eaten cloak, his horse gaunt and streaked with mud. He said he was a hunter and bought some oats for his horse and asked, casual as could be, if the show planned to head north to Riverfork or south-east to Huxdon, or if the rumors of bandits on the main road had changed their plans. Zora gave no definitive answer.

Finn and Rae, cleaning buckets near one of the wagons, heard every word.

Before leaving, the hunter lingered too long at the edge of camp. At dusk, Finn saw him crouched behind a bush, scribbling on a piece of bark, then vanish back in the direction of Ainsdra. Finn went to Zora's tent as the first stars bled through the evening sky.

She was already waiting, smoking from a black pipe. "You saw him," she said, not a question.

Finn nodded, glancing to where the canvas flap shivered in the wind. "He's a scout. Or worse."

Zora grunted, and her voice lost its pleasant lilt. "Not the first we've had. Might be the last, if we're lucky."

Finn wondered if Zora knew about the shard, or if she just made a habit of sheltering fugitives. Maybe in her world, everyone was running from something.

"I won't bring trouble here," Finn said, meaning it.

She let the silence stretch. "You already have. But I knew the risks when I agreed to take you on."

CHAPTER 2

CORRUPTION'S TOUCH

Devan Brack measured the room in paces—six wide, twelve long, the dimensions of a cell masquerading as a merchant's office. He circled the perimeter again, the low heels of his boots ticking out a metronome against the lacquered boards. Outside, the bells of Ainsdra's western quarter tolled in the waning evening, each note scraping like a knife on porcelain.

The room was not to his taste. It reeked of old money and worse secrets. The furniture, though functional, had been scavenged from other rooms in the guild hall: a battered ledgerman's desk, two mismatched chairs, and a table scored with ink rings and knife gouges. The guildmaster's wall safe had been picked clean and left agape.

Brack ignored the safe. He had commandeered the office for its strategic value, not its amenities. Apart from it not being under his father's nose in the castle, from the second-floor window he could see the main avenue, the library's torchlit steps, and the parade of shopkeepers locking up for the night. He had a man stationed on every corner within two blocks. He had double that many on the rooftops, and twice again counting the local beggars pressed into service by coin or threat.

It should have been enough.

He gripped the edge of the table, fingers splayed. His knuckles blanched white, then red. On the surface lay an avalanche of paper—maps with the city's arteries inked in blue and black, witness accounts annotated in Brack's own spidery hand. The most vital detail eluded him: the quarry had slipped the net.

He had known rage, but this was something cleaner. Rage made one stupid; this was closer to hunger.

He was still cataloguing the litany of failure when a fist rapped at the door. The handle turned, and Captain Briar entered with the nervous energy of a man crossing a wolf's den.

"Sir," Briar said, eyes on the wall behind Brack's shoulder.

Brack did not offer a seat. "Report."

"They're gone," Briar said, his voice steady only through practiced discipline. "The sweep at the east gate found a trail, but it dead-ends in a leather tannery.

Sappers checked for false walls. Nothing. Same at the northern road. We have men posted at every—”

“Enough,” Brack said, slicing the air with a finger.

A silence unfolded. Briar shifted his weight, boots squeaking.

Brack allowed himself a shallow breath, inhaling the ghosts of burnt wax and cold ledger ink. “Then they’re alive, and they’re together. Which means our window is not yet closed.”

He stepped to the map board, tracing the routes with a dry fingertip. The missing girl—the thief—would have probably bolted for the south back to Cassily but the boy... the boy was a different problem. He had never encountered such a blank before. He had no idea who he was.

Briar cleared his throat again. “If I may, sir. There’s a... consolation. The man who covered their escape.”

Brack raised an eyebrow. He let the silence do the rest.

“He’s in the holding cell,” Briar said. “He had a shard.”

Brack’s mind unspooled with a thousand possible uses. “Do we know who he is?”

“No. He hasn’t said anything. Fought like an animal when he came round, but we already had him in irons. He took a bolt to the thigh in the fight but it’s not life-threatening unless it gets infected.”

“I’ll do the interrogation myself,” said Brack. “And Captain,” Brack said, each syllable sharp as a blade tip. “Bring me any evidence he had on him. Every rag, every scrap of paper, every...” He scanned the mess on the table, “...every trinket. I don’t care if it’s a nail or a lover’s braid. If I find you missed anything, I’ll have you bled for idiocy and left to the gutter.”

Briar did not answer with words. His retreat was wordless and immediate, the door latching with a muted click.

He stood in silence, letting his pulse slow. When he’d counted to thirty, he started clearing the reports from the desk. He arranged the maps in a new grid, this time overlaying the public transit diagrams with the maintenance tunnels running beneath the city’s main square. There had been a rumor about the old aqueducts—one of his informants had said that local thieves used them to move goods out of the city undetected. The same informant had also reported the recent, suspicious interest of an itinerant alchemist and a carnival woman who claimed to read fortunes. It was, he reflected, rarely the obvious thread that unraveled the whole tapestry, but always the greasy, half-forgotten ones at the edge.

He was mid-calculation when Captain Briar returned, this time carrying a brown satchel. Briar placed it on the desk and stepped back, a trained dog awaiting orders.

“Show me,” Brack said.

Briar produced the contents: a dented tin flask, some spare clothes, hard tack biscuits, and a shard in a leather pouch on a thong. His interest sharpened.

He reached for the obsidian. The fragment faintly vibrating between his fingers. Brack pressed a thumb into the sharpest edge until it drew blood. He watched the welling red bead.

“Captain,” he said without looking up, “prepare the prisoner for an interview. And send for a surgeon—someone skilled, not a butcher. I’ll need the man kept lucid and alive for a long time.”

Briar saluted and departed.

Brack walked to the window and looked out over the city. Ainsdra’s towers glowed with the reflected amber of evening, but beneath the gold, the shadows already pooled and stretched, swallowing the street corners and alleyways. Somewhere out there, the boy and his friends huddled, thinking themselves safe.

He waited, watching the night fall, until the city was only movement and light. Then, turning from the window, he allowed himself a small, clean smile—one reserved for checkmate.

The next move would be his.



Brack followed the spiral of stone steps into the cellar. Down here, the stink of city and blood converged, and every sound found an echo. Ainsdra’s foundations were old and Brack admired the architectural foresight that allowed a man to conduct business beneath the notice of even the most intrusive neighbor. Three landings down, he stopped at a reinforced door. The guard posted there—a mountain of a man with the arms of a smith—saluted without making eye contact.

“He’s awake?” Brack asked.

The guard nodded. “Stitched and alive, just as you ordered.”

Brack smiled thinly. “Wait outside.”

He stepped through the threshold, letting the door’s iron weight close behind him.

The chamber was lit by a single line of oil lamps bolted high on the wall, their flames warped and doubled in the mirrored reflectors. The result was a hallucination of space, with shadows breeding new shadows, and corners that refused to be still. In the center, bound to a heavy wooden chair by wrists and ankles, was the prisoner.

The blood had seeped from his scalp and pooled in the hollow above his collarbone. His face, battered and purpled, wore an expression somewhere between contempt and boredom. His thigh was freshly wrapped with a bandage. No new blood seeped from it.

Brack circled once, studying him from every angle. He was all sharp angles - a man used to hardships. His own pulse grew insistent as he drew nearer. He wasn't nervous; it was the anticipation of what he was about to do.

He stopped behind Thorn's left shoulder and spoke in the casual register of a man inviting a peer to a meal. "Welcome to Ainsdra, Sir. My apologies for the hospitality; my staff are not trained for subtlety."

Thorn bared his teeth, blood bright against them. "Then you're overpaying them."

Brack smiled with genuine pleasure. He liked his opponents lucid, quick on their feet. "You are aware of who I am?"

Thorn's eyes flickered to the lamp, to the door, back to Brack. "Drevan Brack. The king's spymaster."

"And you are?" Brack said. Thorn kept his lips tight.

Brack sighed. He drifted to the table set just outside Thorn's reach. On it sat a small lead-lined box. Brack unlocked it with a key from his vest, revealing the obsidian shard inside. Even inert, it radiated a darkness that was somehow thicker than the shadows in the room. He lifted it between his thumb and finger, holding it to the light.

"Curious, isn't it?" Brack said, examining the surface. "All this death and running, just for a fragment."

Thorn glared at the shard as if it might leap for his throat.

Brack watched him, waiting for the telltale signs—the shallow intake of breath, the twitch of an eye. They arrived right on cue.

"I took the liberty of removing yours," Brack said, voice dropping to a whisper. "Do you feel it? The absence? Some say it's like a phantom limb, others like the sudden loss of faith. What would you call it?"

Thorn pressed his lips together.

The air in the room shifted, a static charge tickling the fine hairs on his arms.

Thorn's head jerked back. His whole body went rigid, as if a spike had been driven through his spine.

"There it is," Brack murmured. "Fascinating, isn't it? Most men can't bear the proximity."

He moved closer, holding the shard in front of Thorn's face. The obsidian's surface writhed with a fine red light, a corona of arcing filaments barely visible to the naked eye.

Thorn met the gaze of the fragment first, then Brack's. The fear was there now, slick and raw in the eyes.

Brack smiled. "This," he said, "is my shard. The thirteenth. And together you are going to give me the answers I need about the other two shardbearers who were with you."

He sat on a low stool across from Thorn, legs crossed, and waited for the tremor in the air to subside. The guards outside shuffled, the oil lamp hissed. In this room, nothing else existed.

“Shall we begin?” Brack asked, and for the first time since descending into the cellar, he felt the pure, sharp joy of the hunt.

He raised the pulsing shard and smiled into Thorn’s silence.

Brack watched Thorn begin to sweat. The man’s jaw was clenched, his breathing shallow but controlled.



Brack ascended the spiral stairs to his private study, each footfall restoring the measured discipline that the interrogation had momentarily chipped away. The lanterns along the corridor guttered in the cross-breeze, their oily flames warping the shadows. He let the flicker pattern over his knuckles before closing the door behind him.

The events of the last hour replayed with the crisp clarity of a ledger entry: the prisoner’s name surrendered at last—Thorn—but nothing of substance beyond it. Nothing about how long he’d had the shard, the circumstances of his arrival in Ainsdra, or the route he’d taken across the continent’s veins. Not the identity of the boy who’d traveled with him, though Brack had learned, through other means, that a girl accompanied them too. He had never known of three shards being together at the same time. Did this bode well or ill?

He allowed himself a moment to study the city below through the warped lens of his window. The outskirts glittered with the lamps of the newly rich and damned. Somewhere out there, the farmboy and the thief were improvising their next move. He tried to imagine the boy’s face—he’d only seen it in outline and shadow, the way one glimpsed a stag through brush at dusk.

He traced the edge of the desk with one finger, feeling the slight swell where a splinter had once embedded itself and left a scar of harder wood behind. The sensation reminded him of the first time he’d ever held a shard. He’d been a young man, already dead inside from his father’s discipline and for a single moment the obsidian fragment had lit up the marrow of his soul. He remembered the taste: coppery, electric, addictive. He’d spent the years since learning to control and resist, to sublimate the urge. But the memory of that first touch, of the way the world had shuddered and resolved itself around a new axis, never quite left him.

A rap at the door drew him back to the present.

“Sir,” Captain Briar said, feet planted just inside the threshold. The man carried a small scroll tube with the royal seal.

Brack accepted it with a nod, snapping the wax with his thumbnail. The message was brief, but he read it three times for any nuances. The king was gravely

ill. Prince Ewan had declared himself regent, and the Privy Council had been summoned for an emergency session. Brack's presence in the capital was, as of this instant, not merely requested but demanded.

He felt the stirrings of a smile, the kind that started at the jaw and only later reached the eyes. So, the poison had worked. The work of months, maybe years, and all it had taken was a single, perfectly timed dusting of toxin in a goblet. He filed away a mental note to reward—or eliminate—the agent upon his return. The only question now was how quickly the chaos would spread, and whether it would mask or expose his own movements.

"Your orders, sir?" Briar asked, eyes carefully averted.

Brack considered briefly. "Ready the horses. We leave for Keystone immediately."

"And the prisoner?" Briar asked.

Brack considered this. "Transport him by secure wagon. He lives, for now. Keep his shard locked away but close enough to prevent the prisoners deterioration. Make it clear to the guards that if that shard is lost, their deaths will be memorable."

The prisoner might yet prove useful, perhaps the key to finding the farmboy.

Briar nodded and left with a crispness that suggested relief.

Alone again, Brack poured himself a measure of the bitter local liquor and sipped, letting its heat percolate through his frostbitten nerves. He scanned the maps arrayed on the wall, each one marked with the locations of recent shard sightings and the slow advance of his own influence. There was a logic to it all, a geometry of power that only he seemed able to see. The king's illness would trigger a wave of panic in the capital. Opportunists would try to grab what they could before the regent consolidated his authority. The merchant houses in the south would hedge their bets, holding off on shipments until the succession was clear.

Brack smiled at the possibility of capturing three more shards. The best traps weren't spring-loaded; they were built out of the prey's own compulsions. He'd seen it enough times to know that the right kind of suffering could break even the most stubborn loyalty. If the boy came for Thorn, Brack would catch them. If not, the prisoner's knowledge could be extracted at leisure in the dungeons beneath the capital. Either way, the net was tightening.

He finished his drink and began packing his effects: the coded journals, the vial of backup toxin, and the small lead-lined box that contained the thirteenth shard. The weight of it in his palm was a reminder of the stakes. Most believed there were only twelve. He alone had proof of the thirteenth, and with it, the leverage to remake the world's balance of power.

By the time Briar returned, Brack had composed himself into the image of a loyal servant of the realm, poised and precise.

"The horses are ready, sir."

“Good,” Brack said, slipping on his gloves. “Any news of the girl?”

“She slipped the net, but we’re casting further out. The river routes are watched.”

“Not well enough,” Brack said. “Double the reward for her capture. Dead’s useless; I want her alive.”

Briar hesitated, then: “And if she dies in the attempt? The thief, I mean. She won’t be easy to hold.”

Brack considered. “Then make sure it’s public. Use her body as bait. If the boy is with her his resolve will fracture. They always do.”

He stepped into the corridor, the cold air sharpening his focus. Behind him, the study’s lamps flickered out, one by one, until the city was visible only as a mosaic of shadow and trembling light.