

# Prologue

The dimly lit corridor echoed with the faint clink of armor as two guards patrolled back and forth. Black iron swords hung at their belts; blades forged exclusively for the king's guard. At the end of the corridor another two guards were posted by an oak door reinforced with iron.

The Shapeless One was hiding in the shadows behind a statue of Raanon - the unifier of the disbanded Sothian kingdoms – observing the patrolling men. From the time they disappeared around the corner until they reappeared, he managed to count to fifty-four. The second time to fifty-two. The third only to fifty.

"Those two idiots always sleep when on guard," one of the patrolling men told his comrade as they disappeared around the corner again.

The Shapeless One peeked out between the legs of the statue. Just as the soldier had pointed out, the two guards were leaning against the door, arms crossed over their chests and heads resting downwards. The Shapeless One counted to ten and cupped his hands around his mouth.

"Those two idiots always sleep when they are on guard," he imitated the soldier's voice.

The more heavily built of the guards jerked. He smacked his lips and hit his comrade with an elbow. "Wake up, Eranin."

"Calm down", the one called Eranin slurred as his head bounced up from his chest. "I'm awake."

"Come here, Eranin. Come, both of you", said the Shapeless One. "You have to see this." The imitation of the soldier was easier than he had imagined.

Eranin gestured to his companion to follow. The clatter of armor echoed closer.

*Twenty.*

The Shapeless One prepared himself. The art of killing in total silence was a craft he had honed to perfection. In addition to precision and speed, it was about choosing the right moment and predicting the victim's next movement.

It had been years since his rookie days, but this was the first time it had taken him longer than a second to dispose of two targets. With a swift, practiced motion, he slipped out of the shadows and lunged forward. Eranin's neck snapped in a heartbeat, but his companion slipped, throwing off the blow meant for his throat and causing it to glance off his cheekbone

instead. Before he could scream, the Shapeless One's knife found his throat. Both guards fell, their bodies caught and laid quietly on the floor.

*Twenty-three.*

The Shapeless One swept through the corridor, his tanned leather shoes silent against the carpet. He pressed his ear against the cold planks of the door.

Silence.

He grabbed a lockpick from his back pocket and got to work. The pick slipped into position, but the complex lock resisted. He readjusted it carefully.

*Thirty-two.*

He gently pressed upwards and rotated the knob...

*Click.*

Leaving the silent corridor behind, he slipped through the door and entered the king's private study. He moved quietly along the walls, past the bookshelves where planks arched under the weight of dusty books and around the table on which stacks of documents and scriptures were spread out. There was an eerie silence in the room, only broken by the crackling of a glowing fireplace.

*Forty.*

The bedroom door was ajar. He put his better eye on the keyhole. Pitch black. Gently, he slid into the room and waited until his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Through a window, the moon's shiny silver glow fell on the four-poster bed, bathing the bedroom in a soft ethereal light. He carefully moved the bed curtain to the side.

And froze.

A child lay nestled between the royal couple, his arm resting protectively on his father's head, tiny fists tangled in his curls. The Shapeless One felt his chest tighten. He forced himself to breathe.

*This changes nothing.*

The king's bearded face gleamed in the moonlight; a mask of innocence betrayed by his sweet, peaceful slumber.

*Fifty.*

At last, the Shapeless One would have his revenge. At last, King Raanon would die.