

Prologue

The dimly lit corridor was patrolled by two guards wearing polished armor. Swords made of black iron hung in their belts, weapons especially made 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 fifty.

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

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 crossing 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. Get over here, 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 rattling sound of armor approached.

Twenty.

The Shapeless One prepared himself. The art of killing in total silence was a craft he honed. In addition to precision and speed, it was about choosing the right moment and being able to predict the victim's next movement. Ideally, such a kill would take place when the target was completely still. This was the first time since he was a rookie it took him longer than a second to dispose of two targets. Although Eranin's neck was broken in a heartbeat, his friend sneezed causing the blow aimed at his throat to hit the cheekbone instead. Before the guard managed to scream, The Shapeless One struck him again. Both guards fell, caught in his arms.

Twenty-three.

After silently laying the dead on the floor, he swept through the corridor - the tanned leather shoes did not give the slightest sound against the carpet. He put his ear against the cold planks of the door. Silence. He grabbed a lockpick from his backpocket and got to work. The pick fell into the right position, but something went awry. A lock of this complex kind often caused trouble. He readjusted the pick.

Thirty-two.

He gently pressed upwards and rotated the knob...

Click.

Once inside the 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 the glowing fireplace.

Fourty.

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, giving the bedroom a fabulous luster. He carefully moved the bed curtain to the side.

And froze.

A child was lulled between the royal couple. A boy laying on his side with a small protective arm resting on his father's head and tiny fists tied in his curls.

This changes nothing, he thought to himself.

The king's bearded face shone with a lying innocence in the sweet state of sleep.

Fifty.

Finally, the Shapeless One would get his revenge. Finally, king Raanon would die.