

SHADOWED CROWN

THE ASHEN THRONE, BOOK 2

K.W. BUSSARD

STRAY CAT STRUT

CHAPTER 0

The cat landed lightly in the narrow alley below, its paws touching the stone without sound. For a moment it remained still, lifting its head to glance back toward the balcony where Lysa still stood beneath the pale wash of moonlight. The wind shifted along the rooftops, carrying with it the faint scent of smoke from the tannery fire. The cat's ears twitched once, and then it turned away from the building and slipped deeper into the sleeping city.

Arden's Wake stretched outward in uneven layers of timbered roofs and leaning stone walls where the upper floors of old buildings pressed close together. The cat moved through that maze with quiet certainty. It climbed a stack of rain barrels, leapt to a windowsill, and from there pulled itself onto the edge of a slanted roof where worn tiles sagged beneath its weight.

The city spread before it in muted silhouettes of chimneys, towers, and distant lanterns that burned low through the night.

The cat began to move again, weaving along the ridgeline of the roof and slipping between the narrow gaps where chimneys broke the skyline. When it reached the edge of the building it paused, studying the distance to the next rooftop with steady green eyes. The gap was wider than the last, though the creature did not crouch to jump.

For the briefest instant its form seemed to blur against the moonlight.

A heartbeat later the cat stood upon the far roof where nothing had carried it across.

It continued without hesitation, padding along narrow beams and broken tiles as the sleeping city slipped past beneath its paws. The busy quarters slowly gave way to a quieter stretch near the inner wall where older estates had once stood before the growth of Arden's Wake swallowed them. Stone boundaries now divided the land into forgotten courtyards and gardens that had long since surrendered to creeping ivy and tangled weeds.

One garden remained untouched.

High walls enclosed the space on every side, their surfaces thick with climbing roses whose pale branches clung to the stone. Within those walls stood a small pavilion of white stone beneath the sweeping limbs of an ancient willow tree. Its leaves stirred softly in the night breeze, whispering against one another as they shifted.

A lantern burned on a small table beneath the tree.

The cat slipped through a narrow break in the wall and padded across the grass toward the pavilion steps. The scent of steeped herbs drifted from the porcelain cup resting beside the lantern. A woman sat waiting there, her posture relaxed as she held the warm cup between her hands as though the late hour had never troubled her.

She lifted her gaze as the cat approached, her eyes settling upon the creature with intrigue. She had been waiting for its arrival.

"Did you make contact with her?"

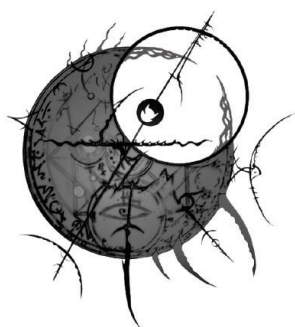
The cat held her gaze for a moment. Its green eyes lingered with brief consideration before it sat back on its hind legs and ran a slow lick across one raised paw, drawing it over its ear in an unhurried gesture. A soft meow followed in answer.

It rose again and stepped lightly onto the pavilion bench before climbing into the woman's lap. The cat curled comfortably against the folds of her robes as a low purr began to rumble through its chest.

The woman brushed her fingers across the cat's back once, slowly, while the lantern light flickered across the garden. A faint smile touched her lips.

"Lovely."

ACT III



*And in that ripple, existence convulsed.
Meaning clawed its way into the un-
formed.
Memory opened its eyes for the first
time...
and wept.*

*What emerged was not creation.
It was awareness, aware of itself being
aware.
The origin did not bloom. It writhed.*

CHAPTER ONE

FRACTURE IN THE VEIL

The wind in the northwestern mountains carried the familiar scent of iron and damp stone.

The ranger slowed as the trees began to thin. Pine roots pushed through shale and loose gravel, and small stones shifted beneath his boots as he approached the edge of the treeline. Beyond the final row of trunks, the land descended toward the mining village of Greymark. At this hour, smoke should have been rising from the chimneys, and the steady rhythm of hammer on ore should have carried faintly up the slope. Carts should have moved along the central road between the storehouse and the shaft. Instead, the village lay quiet beneath a pale haze that dulled the color of timber and stone alike.

He crouched behind a fallen trunk and studied the valley without moving. The air above the mine's entrance wavered slightly. At first glance it resembled heat rising from deep stone, yet the morning air was cold enough that his breath lingered before him. The distortion did not disperse as smoke would under wind. It lingered and gathered. Thin strands drifted outward from the mouth of the shaft and settled low along the ground before thinning near the outer buildings, as though whatever emerged from the mine preferred to remain close to the earth.

Rumors had traveled south these past weeks. Livestock wandering into ravines without reason. Sudden violence among men who had worked beside one another for years. A miner who had attacked his own kin in a moment no one could explain. The stories had been repeated often enough to dull their shock, though not their unease. He had listened, weighed the accounts, and chosen to see for himself rather than dismiss them as fear born from isolation.

He turned his attention to the livestock first. A cow stood beside an overflowing trough where the pooled water had clouded to a dull gray. The animal's hide appeared uneven in tone, its natural color washed thin. It did not lower its head to drink. Its jaw moved in a slow, repetitive motion, though there was nothing in its mouth. A dog crossed the yard near the well, its gait dragging slightly at the rear legs. It passed within arm's reach of one of the villagers without lifting its ears or turning its head, showing no sign of awareness or instinct.

The ranger shifted his focus to the men carrying a crate between them. Their movement lacked coordination, as though each step required conscious effort rather than habit. One stumbled on level ground, yet the other did not turn to steady him. Neither spoke. When one angled his head toward the storehouse, faint lines became visible along his neck and jaw. The fractures were subtle but unmistakable, thin breaks in the skin that caught the light at certain angles. A dim violet shimmer pulsed beneath them before fading again, leaving the flesh drawn taut as though something beneath pressed outward against its bounds.

He had seen plague before. He had seen curse and starvation and the slow collapse of a body worn thin by labor. This followed a different pattern. The affliction appeared structured, advancing along defined paths rather than spreading randomly. Whatever had taken hold here had done so with intent.

A woman stepped from a doorway carrying a bucket and halted several paces from the threshold. She turned her head toward the mine as though called by something beyond hearing. The bucket slipped from her hand and struck the ground, water spilling into the dirt and darkening it in widening arcs. She did not look down. She did not move.

The haze near the shaft thickened slightly, coiling outward in narrow strands that clung to the earth and drifted between buildings. The ranger drew a slow breath and considered the pattern unfolding before him. If this was a fracture in the Veil, it had taken hold beneath the mountain and was bleeding upward through stone. His hand moved to the leather tube at his belt.

“Dart,” he called quietly.

A shape detached from the upper branches behind him and descended without sound, settling upon his gloved forearm. The hawk’s feathers shifted once in the wind, but its eyes remained clear and alert. Torin studied the village a moment longer before speaking.

“You see it.” The hawk’s talons tightened slightly against the leather in response.

He crouched deeper into the shadow of the fallen trunk and withdrew parchment and charcoal from his satchel. He wrote without flourish, keeping the lines brief and precise.

Greymark. Northwestern ridge. Distortion from mine entrance. Villagers altered. Visible arcane fissures in flesh. Livestock affected. Possible Veil fracture. Immediate assistance required.

He blew lightly across the parchment to clear the loose dust, then rolled it tight and secured it within the narrow tube fastened to the hawk’s leg.

“To the Sanctum. With haste.”

Dart lifted from his arm in a strong upward sweep and cut through the cold air toward the higher peaks. The hawk circled once above the treeline before turning south and disappearing against the pale sky. Torin remained in position, resisting the impulse to reach for his blade. Steel would not mend a thinning Veil, and cutting down the afflicted would neither close the fracture nor halt its spread. The source lay within the mine, and whatever pressed outward from it had already taken root among the villagers.

Below, one of the miners paused in the road and slowly turned his head toward the treeline. Torin held his stance and kept his breathing steady, unwilling to betray his position with sudden movement. From this distance he could not see the full detail of the man's expression, yet the faint glimmer in his eyes was visible even across the yard, a muted violet sheen that caught the morning light before fading again. After several heartbeats, the man resumed walking as though nothing had drawn his attention at all.

Torin eased back into the cover of the trees. Until aid arrived from the Sanctum, he would observe and measure the spread of the corruption rather than confront it without understanding. The haze continued to drift from the mine in a steady, unbroken flow, and the mountain gave no sign that it intended to contain what had begun within it.



The hawk arrived as dusk settled along the higher peaks.

It passed between the spires of the Sanctum as the evening bells marked the hour, wings steady against the thinning mountain air. Stone balconies lined the inner walls, their surfaces etched with sigils that caught the fading light but did not flare or shimmer in spectacle. Apprentices crossing the courtyard paused only briefly to follow the bird's descent before returning to their tasks. Messengers from the outer ridges were not uncommon.

Master Ildan stood near the western parapet when the hawk alighted upon the stone rail. His hands were folded behind his back, posture straight despite the wind that tugged at his white hair and the hem of his robes. He extended one arm without haste. The hawk stepped forward and raised its leg.

Ildan removed the parchment and read it in silence. His expression remained composed as his eyes moved across the brief report. Those nearest him would have noticed no visible shift, though his stillness deepened as

he reached the final line. When he finished, he folded the parchment once and held it at his side.

“Void corruption,” he said quietly, more to himself than to the hawk.

He gave the bird a small nod. It lifted from the parapet in a clean sweep of wings and banked away from the tower, circling once above the Sanctum before disappearing into the dimming sky.

Below, in the main training yard, Caelan continued his drills.

The stone beneath his boots bore faint scoring from repetitive practiced movements, and his footwork followed those worn paths with growing confidence. His blade moved in structured arcs, each strike perfected rather than hurried. The infusion of energy along the steel remained visible but controlled, a faint shimmer that traced the edge without spilling beyond it. Weeks earlier the weave had flickered under strain, resisting his attempts to bind it to motion. Now it responded with greater steadiness, aligning more naturally with the rhythm of his breathing and the angle of his wrist.

Ildan descended the tower steps and crossed into the yard without interrupting him. He waited until Caelan completed the sequence before speaking.

Caelan lowered his blade and inclined his head. “Master.”

“Your timing has improved,” Ildan said. “You are no longer forcing the weave to follow your motion. It is beginning to move with it.”

Caelan acknowledged the observation with a small nod, though his gaze shifted to the parchment in Ildan’s hand. The subtle satisfaction that had accompanied the end of his sequence faded.

“What has happened?”

“A mining village along the northwestern ridge,” Ildan replied. “There are reports of distortion at the mine entrance. The villagers display visible arcane fissures in the flesh. Livestock are similarly altered.” He regarded Caelan steadily. “This will not remain contained if the source is left unaddressed.”

Caelan’s grip tightened slightly around the hilt of his sword. “How far?”

“Several days by foot along the mountain paths. We do not have that time.” Ildan’s tone remained even. “You have asked for experience beyond controlled forms and measured exercises. You will have it.”

There was no trace of bravado in Caelan’s expression now. Only focus. “When do we depart?”

“Immediately. We will teleport to the outer ridge. The exertion will require recovery afterward, so our intervention must be precise. Once there, you will observe before acting. If this is a fracture in the Veil, haste without understanding will worsen it.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Gather what you require. Nothing more.”

Caelan sheathed his blade and left the yard at once.

Within the hour, they stood inside the Sanctum’s inner circle, the chamber carved deep into the mountain where the oldest workings of the Order had been etched into stone. The runes beneath their feet formed layered rings that spiraled inward toward a central sigil worn smooth by centuries of invocation. The air carried a faint metallic scent, subtle but unmistakable to those who understood what had been channeled here before.

Ildan stepped into the heart of the circle and placed the base of his staff against the stone. The sound carried outward in a low, resonant tone that seemed to settle into the runes themselves. He closed his eyes briefly, not in uncertainty, but in alignment, drawing the weave inward before shaping it outward again.

When he began to speak, his voice did not rise, yet it carried clearly through the chamber. The words of the incantation moved with practiced precision, each syllable deliberate and unbroken. As the cadence deepened, the runes beneath them responded. Light gathered first at the outer ring, faint and amber, then traveled inward along the carved channels as though guided by unseen currents beneath the stone.

The air thickened gradually. It pressed against Caelan’s chest and ears, subtle at first, then heavier, as if the chamber had been lowered beneath unseen depths.

The glow intensified. Light rose from the runes in thin spirals that wound upward around them. The chamber walls seemed to recede as the

spirals thickened, their motion accelerating with each phrase of the incantation. The floor vibrated beneath their boots with sustained resonance, as though the mountain itself acknowledged the strain placed upon it.

Ildan's voice did not falter. The spirals tightened, drawing inward until they enclosed both master and apprentice in a lattice of moving radiance. The chamber blurred at its edges. Stone lost definition. Sound dulled, then sharpened, then dulled again as if the world struggled to maintain its shape.

When Ildan spoke the final word, the light surged, folding inward, as it collapsed the space between where they stood and where they intended to be. For a breath that stretched beyond measure, Caelan felt the ground shift beneath him though he had not moved. The sensation was neither falling nor rising, but passing through a narrowing threshold where the world itself thinned. The light enveloped them completely. The chamber vanished.

Cold air struck his face an instant later, sharper and thinner than the mountain air of the Sanctum. The light unwound in reverse, spirals peeling away and dissolving into the wind. Stone reformed beneath his boots. The roar in his ears faded to the distant cry of mountain hawks.

Caelan staggered once before catching himself. The weave along his blade flared briefly in protest, then settled as he steadied his breathing. The pressure that had enclosed him moments before released all at once, leaving his limbs heavy and his thoughts a half-step behind his senses.

Ildan remained upright, though a measured exhale escaped him as he withdrew the last threads of the spell through his staff. The faint tracery of the teleportation circle lingered in the rock beneath their feet before fading into nothing, leaving only the natural grain of stone.

The northern ridge stretched before them. Below, a pale haze drifted over the rooftops of Greymark.

"We have arrived," he said quietly.



From his position along the upper ridge, Torin saw the disturbance before he heard it.

Light gathered briefly against the western rise in a contained swell, pressing against stone before collapsing inward again. The flare did not fracture the sky or thunder across the mountain, yet the rock where it formed remained unsettled for several breaths before the wind reclaimed it. Loose gravel shifted, then stilled. The Sanctum had answered.

Torin remained motionless long enough to ensure the village below showed no sign of awareness. The haze continued its slow drift from the mine mouth, threading between rooftops and clinging low to the earth. The villagers moved as before, their altered gait unchanged by the brief disruption above them.

He withdrew a narrow signal arrow from his quiver, its head capped with a sealed alchemical capsule designed for light without sound. Angling the shot toward a rock face that concealed the ridge from Greymark's line of sight, he drew the string back to his cheek and released. The arrow climbed in a clean arc and ignited at its apex in a brief flare of pale gold. The light burned bright and contained, then vanished within seconds. Those above would see it, but those below would not.

Torin slung the bow across his back and began moving along the concealed path that wound between broken stone and scrub pine up towards where the visitors had landed. He kept low and fast, pathfinding his way to avoid casting his silhouette against the sky as he crested the final rise to greet his guests.

Ildan stood with his staff grounded firmly against the rock, posture steady despite the strain the working must have demanded. The air around him still carried a faint tension. Beside him stood Caelan and for a moment Torin simply regarded him.

The last time he had seen him, Caelan had stood in the clearing of the Elderwood beneath the first light of dawn, steel ringing through dew-laden grass as five relentless years of instruction reached their end. Torin had left before sunrise the following morning, leaving nothing but a hawk feather behind and trusting the forest to release him and the boy to step forward alone. The figure before him now bore the shape of that trust fulfilled. The restless urgency that once drove Caelan's movements

had settled into something steadier. His shoulders were broader, his stance grounded without rigidity, his presence marked by quiet control rather than impatience.

“Master,” Torin said, inclining his head first to Ildan in acknowledgment.

“Torin,” Ildan replied evenly.

At the sound of his name, Caelan turned. Recognition crossed his features at once, and the restraint he had held while studying the valley gave way to unmistakable warmth.

“Master Torin,” he said, and the title carried no distance in it.

Torin stepped forward without hesitation. They clasped forearms in the old manner, grip firm and sure, the pressure of it speaking more clearly than words. The contact shifted naturally into an embrace, each man’s free arm striking the other’s back in a brief, solid hold that marked years shared rather than ceremony observed. When they stepped apart, Torin kept his hand at Caelan’s forearm a moment longer, studying him at close range.

“You have filled out your frame,” Torin observed quietly. “The forest did not waste its time.”

Caelan allowed himself a brief smile. “Nor did you.”

Torin’s gaze moved across him again, not searching for fault but measuring refinement. The impatience that once betrayed his footing was gone. The drive remained, yet it no longer spilled beyond discipline. There was steadiness in him that had not existed when he left the Elderwood.

“What have they taught you at the Sanctum?” Torin asked, and beneath the calm tone lay genuine curiosity.

“Enough to know I still have much to learn,” Caelan replied, and though his voice remained measured, there was depth in it that spoke of experience beyond the forest.

There were more questions waiting in the space between them—about the Sanctum, about the path Caelan had walked since leaving the trees—but the haze drifting below them made its presence known even in the mountain wind. Torin’s expression settled as his attention returned to the valley.

“We will speak of it when this is finished.”

Caelan followed his gaze without protest, the warmth of reunion giving way to focus as swiftly as it had surfaced.

“Yes.”

Ildan regarded them both briefly before drawing the moment to its proper end.

“You may conclude your reunion once the fracture is sealed. For now, we attend to the matter at hand.”

Torin inclined his head and turned fully toward Greymark.

“The distortion originates within the mine,” he said, indicating the shaft with a subtle gesture. “It spreads low along the ground and intensifies nearer the entrance. Livestock show early alteration. The villagers bear visible fissures beneath the skin. When startled, they turn violent.”

“Any unmarked?” Ildan asked.

“None that I observed.”

Caelan studied the drifting strands of haze that moved between the buildings. “They cannot be restored?”

Torin did not hesitate. “No.”

The wind carried the faint metallic scent upward from the valley floor.

“The fracture must be sealed at its source,” Ildan said. “The teleportation has drawn heavily. I will conserve what remains for containment once we reach the shaft. The advance will be yours.”

Caelan inclined his head in acceptance.

Torin traced a path along the ridge with his gaze. “The eastern boundary offers cover. There is a storage structure that obscures sight from the well. If we remain along the rear of the buildings and avoid the central road, we can approach the mine entrance without drawing immediate attention. Once engaged, they will converge. We cannot allow ourselves to be surrounded.”

“And the haze?” Caelan asked.

“It thickens within several paces of the shaft. Prolonged exposure would be unwise.”

Ildan’s voice remained steady. “Maintain discipline in your weave. Corruption seeks instability. If you feel it pressing against your thoughts, withdraw. We are here to seal the fracture, not test endurance.”

Caelan adjusted the strap across his shoulder and cast one final look toward the village below. “We move swiftly, avoid entanglement, and seal the source.”

Torin gave a single nod and began leading them along the concealed descent toward Greymark, the haze drifting steadily beneath them as though unaware that its origin was about to be challenged.