CHAPTER 18: AN UNEXPECTED REUNION

Adnan remained in the city only long enough to confirm what Talen had led him to suspect: Clara had fled, and with her his chance of recovering the letter. The trail was cold.

He was furious—at the scholars and their dammed code of sanctuary, yes, but also at himself and his inability to do what was needed. His arm still hung limply in its sling, and though his thick cloak and the anonymity of the city concealed his impairment for the moment, Adnan knew he would become a target once back on the road. Still yet, part of him acknowledged that Clara had spared his dominant arm.

At the southern gate, he faced a choice. Part of him was ready to return to court and accept his punishment. It seemed death was determined to find him now, and he trusted that a hanging would be quick. The second option, which he entertained only idly, was to cross the border—and then what? He could chase down Clara, retrieve the letter, delude himself into thinking he was doing so for anything other than a chance to see her again.

Yes, death would find him either way.

Adnan knew he should stay the night in Elmguard. Though the faith held less sway in the southern border cities, there surely had to be a chapel or at least a shrine somewhere amidst the winding streets where he could pray and come to a decision. As well, regardless of whether his journey would lead him onward or home, the roads were swarming with brigands, and he was in no shape for a fight. Even now, in the gathering dusk, amid the closing stalls of fish mongers along the outer ring of the city, he could make out a crowd of ragged refugees at the river crossing. Rumors of a looming southern invasion were spreading like wildfire throughout the region, and the border villages were almost deserted.

Commented [PS.com1]: Is Talen the name of the scholar from the previous chapter? He never introduced himself, so the reader will wonder who this is. Was he originally meant to be a recurring character? As he doesn't appear again, I would recommend removing the name here and continuing to refer to him simply as the scholar.

Commented [PS.com2]: Since the reader already knows this based on his conversation with Agnes and his struggle with the sword earlier, repeating the information here may come across as too repetitive. I would recommend you delete this sentence to keep the scene moving.

Commented [PS.com3]: This is the first time Adnan acknowledges that he's losing faith in the purpose of his mission, which is excellent. However, the reader is going to start to wonder at some point why it takes him so long to put the pieces together. Even now, he knows enough to realize that King Elias is lying about the contents of the letter, yet never once has he thought about simply fleeing to another kingdom while he has the chance. Why not?

I understand this is meant to emphasize his loyalty, but given that he does eventually flee with Clara, I would recommend starting to acknowledge those seeds of doubt in his inner monologue more explicitly from this point on. You might even have him question whether Elias is the rightful king. As we have a limited number of POV chapters with each character, making sure everyone's motivations are consistent throughout is key. Otherwise, it appears that Adnan does a heel-face turn in the final chapter.

Commented [PS.com4]: Are the refugees at the river northerners who were living in the southern kingdoms and are now returning in case a war breaks out? Consider clarifying, as if the border villages are being deserted, it's not clear why there would be such traffic at the river, which marks the border between the kingdoms.

The Shattered Sword

Example of Pages 147 and 148

Anger and frustration drove him onward as he pressed the fresh mare forward over cobblestones slippery with fish scales and a gathering mist of rain. For a moment, he allowed himself to imagine another path. He was back at the inn in Evesburg, his blood warm from northern ale, the sound of the fiddle drowned out by the torrential rain. In the candlelight, their fingers intertwined over the scarred surface of the table, and in her eyes he saw a thousand nights stretching out ahead of him—a different future, a different life.

"By the prophets—Adnan!"

The shout was accompanied by the somewhat urgent strum of a lute, as though to distinguish it from the cacophony of voices by the river. Adnan turned in the saddle and scanned the crowd. Theodoric, in Elmguard? He caught sight of the halfling clambering across the dock, pushing into the crowd, parting it like the sea.

"Let me through, I say!" Theodoric shouted indignantly as he shoved his way over the final few steps, then stuck a hand out so it barely crested the horse's flank. "Here, reach down and hoist me up."

Adnan hefted the young bard into the saddle in front of him, and while he once could have done so with ease, the strain now pulled across his chest toward the muscles in his lame arm and sent pain lancing through him. He winced, but Theodoric was busy shaking mud off the hem of his cloak and did not notice. What was the halfling doing there? Bards made excellent spies, he had heard, and border cities were ripe with intrigue. Perhaps it would've been best to ignore him and turn his horse around.

"The crossings are choked all the way to Armorshire," Theodoric muttered. "People have lost their minds."

"Theodoric, what are you doing here?"

Commented [PS.com5]: There's some inconsistency here in that when he left the scholars, he was still without a horse, and it was implied that finding one might be somewhat difficult. As this is glossed over now, consider just revising to have the scholars accept his offer to buy the mare so readers aren't confused.

Commented [PS.com6]: Excellent nod to the first book!

Commented [PS.com7]: You established in the first book that halflings do not, by and large, follow the faith, but Theodoric makes religious references a few times throughout the manuscript. I've pointed out three more instances in marginal comments for your attention. In all these cases, he could just be trying to blend in, but given his character, that seems unlikely!

Commented [PS.com8]: On a few other occasions, you've described myths in the faith that are similar to some biblical stories, and I believe this is intentional. However, without further context, this reference to "parting the sea" is out of place. You could address the issue by expanding a little (e.g., "parting it like the prophet Merwyn parted the southern seas"), but since that crosses into the territory of distracting exposition, I would recommend just dropping the simile here.

Commented [PS.com9]: This is a question the reader will share! The last time we saw Theodoric, he was already across the border with Clara and Damien, and they split up at the port in Almast. At that point, he was planning to head further down the coast to rendezvous with the crew. Now he crosses the river again with Adnan, and he gives the same story about where he plans to go. I gather you had two possible plot lines written for Theodoric and mixed them up at some point, correct? Given that Theodoric's ship is held up for several days after Clara and Damien leave, a simple way to fix would be to simply have Adnan run into him in Almast during that time.