

THREADING THE NEEDLE:

Inside Erenthra

by

Joshua Palmatier

Allan rolled over the top of a crumbling wall in the ruins of Erenthra into the niche of darkness on the far side, the hilt of his sheathed sword gouging into his gut. He hissed as he slammed onto his wound. Stone debris rattled down on top of him, dislodged from what had once been part of a shop in the Lantern district. His breath came in harsh gasps. Twisting, he reached around his body, fingers questing through torn cloth, meeting flesh beneath. He groaned as he found three ragged slashes at the base of his rib cage, his fingers coming away slicked with blood. The wounds weren't severe, but they hurt, pain lancing up into his chest with every move.

A howl from one of the Wolves echoed through the darkened ruins of the streets and buildings behind him. He sucked in a breath and stilled, listening.

It was answered a moment later and his heart juddered in his chest.

They were hunting him. It hadn't been a random encounter then. It was a pack.

He wondered briefly if the Wolves had picked up the scent of the rest of the group from the Hollow who were here in Erenthra scavenging for supplies, but he shoved the thought aside. They would be able to hear the howls, and Bryce and his small group of former Dogs would be able to protect the others, even from a pack.

More howls broke the stillness. Allan listened, counting numbers, as he pushed himself

up into a crouch with a wince. He could feel the blood that had soaked into his shirt, weighing it down. He cursed himself again for not sensing the Wolf before it attacked. He'd heard nothing, smelled nothing. It must have been lying in wait for him, downwind. Only a flicker of moonlight glistening on a patch of graying fur had saved him. The jaws meant for his throat had snapped shut on empty air as he ducked and dodged, but he hadn't managed to escape the swipe of the oversized animal's claws.

Now he was bleeding. He'd be easier to track. And based on the location of the howls, he was hemmed in on the north, west, and south.

Which only left the east.

Edging up to the protective wall, he peered over its edge. The open street, littered with broken chunks of stone and collapsed wall, was clear, most of it lit by the glowing lights of the distortion that engulfed the center of Erenthral. Its massive curved wall rose out of the ground three blocks distant, the arms of the distortion pulsing in a variety of colors, the individual shards of reality outlined with jagged arcs of white lightning, all of it frozen in suspended motion. The huge sphere curved up and out slightly before rounding back toward its apex, its center high enough over what had been the city's central district of Grass that only the lower third of it actually intersected the ground. But it still held most of the city—and those citizens who had not escaped before it had quickened—inside those shards. Grass, Hedge, Canal, Eld, and over two dozen other districts, lost. Even the University in Confluence. All caught and held in eerie silence.

A growl split the darkness. Allan jerked around and swore as a Wolf emerged from the shadows behind him. His hand jerked reflexively toward the sword still strapped to his waist, but he grabbed onto the handle of the knife tucked into his belt instead. The blood on his hands

made the knife slippery, but he turned to face the Wolf.

“Come on, you bastard,” he muttered. “I know you’re here now.”

The Wolf snarled, lips drawing back from its teeth. Saliva dripped from its jaws, but Allan could see the lines of humanity in its shortened muzzle, in its not-quite-wolfish ears, and in the strange way it moved as it slipped from the darkness into the light thrown by the distortion. Its limbs were elongated and bent at odd angles. Its fur was close to black, streaked with lines of gray that almost glowed. And its eyes—

Allan’s gut clenched. The Wolf’s eyes were still human. A light green. He could almost see the person the Wolf had been before he’d been caught in one of the banks of auroral lights that appeared at random and swept through the city and beyond, transforming everything they touched, altering it, sometimes beyond recognition, before passing on and eventually fading away. The destructive—yet beautiful—auroras were only one of the new dangers the survivors of the Shattering had to deal with.

The Wolf growled low in its throat and Allan shifted his stance. The Wolf was as big as he was, but with more bulk. He’d never be able to take him alone, not without a lucky jab of his knife through one of the creature’s too-human eyes. Sweat broke out across his back and he swallowed against a shuddering wave of fear. The Wolf’s nostrils flared, and its growl escalated. Allan had dropped his backpack as too cumbersome as soon as he’d had the chance after the first attack. He had nothing but his knife and the sword, and he was blocked on three sides, the rest of the pack—at least six others, by his count—closing in based on the howls. He could only retreat to the east, the direction of the distortion—

The distortion.

Hope surged in Allan’s chest.

At the same moment, the Wolf tensed and leaped.

Allan dove directly toward it, beneath its arc, not even attempting to wound it with his knife as he twisted into a roll, his wounded side screaming as he tucked and slammed into the ground. He was moving before the fresh pain faded, coming out of the roll into a stumbling run, cutting sharply to the left through the cluster of foundation walls that still remained. He heard the Wolf crash into the wall where he'd stood, heard its growl of frustration and the scrabble of claws against stone. Then its howl—filled with urgency and triumph—split the air. Its nearness and intensity sent a ripple of dread up Allan's spine and into the base of his skull. His hand tightened involuntarily on the knife hilt. But it sent a surge of adrenaline through his legs as well and he picked up speed.

His gaze focused down onto the ruins of Erenthrall ahead, on the three blocks between him and the distortion. He dodged through an empty doorway, cut through the scattering of rooms beyond, and emerged into a wide space behind, where the tenants of the building must have grown gardens. There was nothing left of the plants, only a forlorn looking metal bench standing alongside the faint outlines of a stone path, all of it covered in dust. The building on the right was mostly intact, black windows staring down as he skirted the bench and dove into the false protection of the building's inner rooms. Blood pounding loud in his ears, his breath overriding all other sounds, he crashed through an intact door, and into a darkened hallway, the faint outline of stairs to the left. All of it was lit by the diffuse light of the distortion seeping through the blown out windows and open double doorway ahead.

He burst out into the street beyond, angled down its length, tripping over scattered debris on the thoroughfare—bricks from fallen buildings, detritus from those who had died during the explosion—now covered by dust and ash and anything else that could be blown by the vagrant

winds. A ley car's remains had plowed a groove into the stone cobbles, its back end tilted into the air. An entire heap of forged copper pipe lay scattered across the street, the cart that had likely carried the load eaten by the ley as it surged through the city after the explosion. Allan mentally made note of its location; the Hollow always needed pipe. But he didn't have time to pause to inspect it. The street shot straight toward the distortion, its brilliant sphere looming overhead. He was still two blocks away.

He risked a glance over his shoulder, swore as he saw the Wolf leap from the building he'd just vacated and land in the street. It scrambled for a moment to catch its footing, but immediately raced after him, its body elongating as it picked up speed. A sleek hunter, its motions only marred by the fact it had once been human.

Allan turned back just in time to avoid slamming into another ley car, this one canted onto its side. He cursed as he swung around it, reaching out with his free hand to catch his balance against its side. Then he picked up speed. His upper thighs burned with the exertion. His lungs and chest ached. But he clenched his jaw and fought the pain back. He thought he could feel the Wolf's hot breath against his neck, thought he could hear the scritch of its claws against the stone of the street.

He passed into a square, at least two other streets intersecting it, and a dagger-like pain suddenly shot into his side. He gasped and slapped his free hand against the cramp, his gait only broken for a few steps. On the far side of the square, the thoroughfare was hemmed in on both sides by nearly intact buildings, their shapes silhouetted against the distortion. He passed into the cavern between them, only one block away from salvation.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he caught movement. Ahead, another Wolf shot out of the last side street on the left, followed by a second. Both of them centered in on his location

immediately. One of them halted and raised its head to howl, the sound eerily ecstatic. It was answered by a half dozen other howls, all within a block of Allan's position. A frisson of fear sliced down Allan's spine.

The other Wolf charged.

A second glance behind told him that the original Wolf was only a few hundred paces back.

Allan cut right, heading straight for the short set of stairs to the nearest building. He dove into the darkness inside the apartment and charged up the stairs inside toward the upper floors, his thigh muscles screaming. Claws scratched against stone behind him. As he hit the first floor and turned, he saw the shadow of the first Wolf as it scented him, its shape already halfway down the first floor's hall. It scrambled to a halt and glanced up, growling deep in its chest. It twisted around, hitting the bottom of the stairs as the other two plowed into the building. Allan was already halfway down the hall toward the next flight, the three Wolves' movements caught out of the corner of his eye. He rounded the end of the hall, noticed four more Wolves streaking across the street below through the window, another figure walking sedately behind them, and then he was charging up the second flight.

He emerged onto the roof two flights later, stumbling on the last step and catching himself with one hand. His fingers sank into the dust and ash and he inadvertently sucked some into his lungs. Coughing hoarsely, he pushed away and headed toward the roof's edge, plumes of dust kicked up behind him. A stone lip about two feet high surrounded the roof, the next building a floor shorter with a gap at least six feet wide in between.

Allan didn't break stride. He stepped up onto the lip and leaped.

He landed hard, a jolt of pain spiking up through his legs and into his lower back, even

though he tried to twist the end of the jump into a roll. Gasping, he took a moment to catch his breath, easing up into a crouch, knife still clutched in one hand. One ankle throbbed and he glanced behind.

The Wolves had reached the roof, one of them snarling down at him, two others pacing in agitation behind him.

Then the pack leader arrived, walking forward to the edge.

For a single gut-wrenching moment, Allan thought it was Hagger and he nearly collapsed backwards, legs suddenly weak. But no. He'd killed Hagger—drove a sword through his ex-partner's chest—in the moment before the distortion quickened over a year ago. This was someone different. In the gaudy lights from the distortion, he could see that the man's face was covered in a light fur, one ear coming to a point like a wolf's, the other human. His lower jaw jutted forward, not quite prominent enough to be called a snout, although his nose was flattened and wide, as if halted midway through the transformation to a wolf. He glared down at Allan with an implacable hatred and anger, tempered by a cold intelligence. If he hadn't been among the Dogs before the Shattering—or been one of the Hounds—then he would have fit right in with the pack. A sword was sheathed at his side, carried with a cool confidence. He wore a shirt and a tan jacket that looked like it had belonged to one of the lords of Erenthral, with large gold buttons and some type of black embroidery across the shoulders. The breeches were a similar color, with a black panel down the outside of each leg.

Allan and the pack leader locked gazes. Then the pack leader's lip curled up on one side, revealing an oversized canine. He gave a clipped snarl, the two pacing Wolves halting, ears perked. With a flick of his hand, the two vanished from sight. The third, still staring down intently at Allan, hesitated, muscles quivering, then backed out of sight as well.

Allan stood, unease churning in his gut. He began to back away toward the second roof's edge, wondering where the other Wolves he'd seen through the window had gone, whether these three had been ordered to join them.

He'd taken only three steps before the first two Wolves leaped over the lip of the roof, one to either side of the pack leader. The third was a heartbeat behind.

Allan spun, wincing as he put weight on the one ankle. But there was no time for pain. He launched himself across the roof, headed for the next building, slightly taller. Behind, the Wolves landed with bone-jarring thuds, one of them yelping. Allan leaped the gap between the buildings—wider than before—hit the lip of the far building, and leaped again, landing solidly. He didn't glance back, scrambling across the new narrower roof, littered with clay containers that had once contained garden plants, and jumped to the next. The distortion loomed ahead, its outer surface slicing down through the roof of the building half a block away. But the next apartment was a floor higher.

Allan angled to the left, near the edge overlooking the street, saw the rest of the Wolves tracking his progress from below. He swore, still moving, heard the scabble of claws close behind as the other three followed him. One of them snarled in frustration—their pads and nails weren't suited to roof running—but Allan put on a burst of speed, hit the roof's edge, and jumped toward the wall of the next building.

He crashed through the shutters of a window, a splinter of wood slicing across his brow. Blood dripped down into his eye as he slammed into a table and two chairs just inside the room, wood cracking and gouging into his chest and stomach. Sweeping his arms to either side, he lurched to his feet and darted through the abandoned room, past closed cupboards, dishes stacked on a counter, a pot that had melted onto a ley-powered heater. The outer room was also eerily



normal, but empty—of life, of substance. Allan only caught a fleeting impression of an arrangement of chairs, another long, low table, rectangles of art on the walls, a door off to one side, and then he opened the inner door and flung himself through and into the outer hallway. He hesitated, eyes adjusting to the sudden interior darkness, then headed for the stairs to the roof. Something landed in the kitchen behind him with a clatter of snapping wood and shattering pottery. The sound of nails on stairs echoed up from below. Staggering, he pulled himself up the stairs and out onto the roof, heading straight toward the distortion. Leaping the next gap, he flailed as he dropped down to the rooftop another floor below, fresh pain jolting through his body, but he managed to roll through the landing. Two Wolves snarled as they launched from the roof above as he picked himself up.

The first nearly landed on top of him, but he ducked, felt it pass over him and thud into the roof just ahead. In its attempt to snag him, it landed twisted to one side. Allan heard bones snap and it howled in pain. He dodged around its writhing form, felt the vibration of the other hitting the roof as he charged toward the distortion's edge less than fifty paces distant. A Wolf's lean form emerged from the building's roof access to his right, streaking straight toward him. He picked up speed, focused on the distortion, on its glittering, solid-looking edge, a twinge arching up from his ankle. White-hot lightning flared overhead, frozen in mid-motion. He could feel the Wolves at his heels, could feel their breath on the back on his neck. Their snarls prickled in his skin as they closed in on two sides—

And then he cried out and leaped toward the distortion's wall, arms flung out to either side. Something snagged his heel, ripped into his breeches, and twisted his legs out from beneath him.

Then he slammed into the distortion.

It was like diving chest first into water. Allan's breath, unconsciously held, gushed from his lungs as the shard of the distortion first resisted him, then gave. He had never run full on into a shard before, had always picked his way through them, slowly and carefully, especially at their edges. A bitter cold enveloped him, prickling along his skin and seeping deep into his bones. He unconsciously refused to breath in again, his lungs already aching.

Then the pressure holding him back released and he collapsed to the roof on the far side. He sucked in a lungful of air, aware that he hadn't had time to choose which shard he entered, knowing that in some of them, the air was poisonous, that in some there was no air at all—

But he didn't gag or vomit. He tasted nothing on the air but a heavy must, much more pronounced than in the city outside, as if he'd stepped into a room that had long been sealed and left alone. He coughed at the dryness, at the savor of decay, and hunched forward as the tension in his body released and all of his abused muscles began to protest at once. His entire body trembled—with exhaustion and relief—but he still forced himself to raise his head and glance around the shard. Some of the fractured realities held their own dangers, nightmare creatures twisted by the Shattering or anomalies like the auroral lights. He knew of a few shards that had been flooded with the deadly ley itself. But he saw nothing out of the ordinary. Of the hundreds of shards within the distortion, this one appeared fairly normal.

He twisted from his hunched position on hands and knees to a sitting position, knife brandished before him, and glanced back toward the outside world behind him.

He was shocked to see the Wolves still charging toward him; they should have hit it within seconds after he did. Yet their motions were sluggish, as if they were struggling through water. Time could be different from shard to shard, some of them static, everything exactly as it had been at the time the distortion quickened. Others were accelerated, like this one.

Neither of the closest two Wolves appeared to be stopping.

Allan flinched as they plowed into the distortion. But they didn't pass through, as he had. Instead, their muzzles compacted, bodies crumpling as if they'd struck a solid stone wall. Both of them dropped to the roof where the distortion cut through the building, leaving a smear of blood and drool behind. One of them was clearly dead, its head canted at an odd angle, snout crushed. The other lay panting, tongue lolling out of its broken muzzle.

The two Wolves behind them scrambled to stop, forelegs splayed out before them, haunches down. One skidded into the wall, bouncing back unharmed. The other ground into his dead pack mate, flipping over onto his back before gaining his footing and lurching away.

Both of them backed a good twenty paces distant and began pacing, lips curled back in silent snarls. There were no sounds from outside the shard; Allan hadn't even heard anything when they hit the distortion's wall. The two Wolves were joined by two others, all of them moving slowly in long stalking lopes. Allan pushed himself up into a standing position, one of the Wolves darting toward him before banking away at the last instant. They could clearly see him.

The pack leader approached from behind them, moving up to the distortion's edge. He stared at Allan, brow creased in consternation. This close, Allan could see the scars beneath the fur on his face, the pelt discolored in streaks. Everything about the man—the Wolf—spoke of resilience, harshness, death. His distorted features were hard-edged and blunt.

His gaze shifted away from Allan, to the distortion, on hand rising to push against the unforgiving surface of the shard. When it didn't yield, he stared again at Allan, his eyes narrowed, cold and calculating.

Then the man smiled.

A cold shiver crept across Allan's shoulders.

Turning, the pack leader motioned to his Wolves, all of those still mobile falling into step behind him, one out in front to scout as they headed toward the roof's access point. They left their two fallen companions—one dead, the other still panting, blood spreading in a small pool from its muzzle—behind.

Allan waited until they'd vanished through the open door before turning his back on them.

He sighed.

“Now all I have to do is figure out how to get down from here.”

The roof's stairwell was on the other side, and he didn't dare risk passing back outside the distortion. He had no doubts that the pack leader and his Wolves would be waiting for him.

But part of the corner of the roof inside the distortion had caved inward, most likely when the Nexus had exploded and destroyed most of the central part of the city. Allan peered down into the darkness, then over the side of the building. He was three stories up; he'd have to risk whatever might be lying in wait inside the building if he intended to get down from here.

Crouching down at the hole's edge, a few dislodged pebbles and a slew of dust and dirt cascading down inside, he paused to listen. This shard was eerily silent, the sense of desertion palpable, but he'd thought buildings were vacant before in Erenthrall, only to discover otherwise.

Hearing nothing within, sensing nothing, he sheathed his knife, then swung his lower body over the edge.

He'd intended to hang for a moment and then drop into the room below, but the stone roof beneath his torso gave way with a brittle crack. He cried out, hands involuntarily trying to clench onto the chunk of stone beneath his chest.

His feet hit the floor below, the stone beneath his chest a second later. His chin slammed into the surface with teeth-rattling force as dust billowed up around him. He groaned and rolled onto his back, tasted blood from where his teeth had clipped his inner cheek. He swirled it around his mouth—it was the most vibrant, alive sensation in this shard—then rose to a sitting position and dusted himself off. The wounds in his side protested again, but it was minor compared to how his entire body felt now.

He sighed again, then winced his way into a standing position.

The room had once been a bedroom. Bed, small table, dresser with the drawers all open, one of them completely out and resting skewed on the floor, clothes scattered—all of it covered with dust. Someone had ransacked the room, most likely right after the initial explosion, when those who had survived had tried to flee. The roof collapse had formed a small pile of debris in one corner, narrowly missing the bed. He saw no tracks in the dust, no sign of any life, except for what had been disturbed by his own movements.

He made his way to the door, out into the central room, glancing into another bedroom, the kitchen. He paused there, the cupboards all thrown open, pots and dishes scattered across the floor. He automatically checked for food, but there was none. The dust covering the floor had been disturbed with footprints here, although even these were faded and old.

“They must have taken the food with them,” he muttered. His voice sounded loud and out of place. He shook his head, something bothering him about what he’d seen in the kitchen, but he couldn’t figure out what.

He moved into the outer hall, checked the other rooms on this floor before hitting the stairs and doing the same on each level as he descended. He found all of the doors open, all of the kitchens and rooms in the same state, drawers pulled, clothes and everyday items strewn

across the floor, as if someone had methodically searched the building.

When he reached the street, he moved to the edge of the distortion, but Wolves were waiting on the far side. They'd seen movement, were rising in reaction, lips curling into snarls. He turned away, headed down the street, pausing occasionally to enter other buildings. They were all the same—abandoned, ransacked. Even the few shops he discovered—a bakery, a café, another selling cloth—had been pillaged.

“This wasn't done after the explosion,” he murmured, staring down at the bolts of fabric. “There wasn't enough time.”

Glancing up, he caught sight of an apothecary and his heart quickened. Trotting across the street, the edge of the distortion now far enough behind that he couldn't see the Wolves any longer, he entered the shop and felt his knees grow weak.

Bottles were strewn across the counters and racks on either side, some broken, but most of them whole. He picked his way to one side and began holding up containers at random, checking their labels. “Bloodwort . . . coraphile . . . poppy seed . . . breadmold.” He reached for his satchel, then cursed as he remembered he'd been forced to drop it to escape the Wolves. Clutching the medicines against his chest with one hand, he searched the shop for a bag, a leather pouch, anything that would hold whatever he could find and take back to the Hollow—

He halted behind the back counter as realization struck. Those in the Hollow, and all of the other survivors, had been scavenging and looting Erenthrall for food, medicine, and supplies since the Shattering. They'd been scouring the buildings outside the distortion for the past year, fighting amongst themselves as groups laid claim to entire sections of the city, like the Wolves or the group of Temerites in the eastern district of Gorge. All of them had grown increasingly more desperate as resources became more and more scarce.

But none of them had considered what lay trapped inside the distortion. A good portion of the shards were likely unreachable, or whatever lay inside them unusable, but there would be pockets like this one where some of the supplies would be untouched.

And he could reach them when no one else could.

He shook himself and continued searching. He ran across a bottle of asperic and crunched a few of the pills to help ease the pain in his muscles. One cabinet was full of rolled bandages, so he cleaned and wrapped the three slashes as best he could. They'd stopped bleeding at least. In another drawer, he found a leather bag with a drawstring that could be slung over one shoulder, and he began filling it with whatever medicines he could find. Some of it was probably useless, its potency faded with time, but he had no idea which ones would still be good, so he chose whatever he found or whatever names he recognized from what the healers in the Hollow had told them to look for specifically. He could always come back for more later.

Bag full, he positioned it behind the hip opposite his sword and then left the apothecary. Outside, the night lit by the white-hot frozen lightning of the surrounding shard walls had shifted into dawn. He glanced up, a thrill of unease tingling through him—it was still a few hours until dawn outside the distortion—but there was no sky, only the night-dark planes of the shard overhead. He rolled his shoulders and continued down the street, toward what looked like a square.

He found the residents of this shard at the fountain in the square's center.

The fountain was completely dry, the angel with wings outspread, hands clasped at chest level, head tilted toward the heavens standing over an empty basin. Food had been stacked around the outside lip of the fountain: glass jars of canned vegetables and fruits; burlap sacks of rice, flour, sugar; loaves of bread, rounds of cheese, a few barrels and crates. Allan thought at

first it was all simply debris, but as he drew closer he realized it had been pulled from the kitchens of the surrounding buildings and gathered here, in one place. Near what was likely the only water source in the shard. But the fountain would not have lasted forever.

When he was close enough to pick out the bodies strewn among the supplies, he halted. Two of them—a man and a woman—were leaning up against the fountain, desiccated faces tilted back or to one side. The woman held a baby in her arms. Another man was stretched out on the ground to one side, curled up, as if he'd lain down to sleep and simply died. All of them were emaciated.

Allan swallowed down the large, hot lump that formed in the back of his throat and blinked away the sudden burn of tears at the corners of his eyes. A sick despair filled his chest. These people had been caught in the shard when the distortion formed. They couldn't escape, and so they'd searched the buildings and gathered all of the food. They must have waited here, beneath the angel, for salvation, for someone to rescue them, or for the distortion to close and kill them. But time moved faster in this shard and they'd run out of water.

Yet they still had jars of vegetables and fruits. Allan frowned and moved forward again, kneeled down next to the man closest to him, the one lying on the ground.

A dagger stood out from his chest.

Allan looked up sharply. Both the man, woman, and child appeared unharmed. He shifted closer.

The man was holding one of the bottles from the apothecary in one hand, his lips and fingertips tinted blue, a smear of dried spittle at the corner of his mouth. Bitterbane was written on the label in red, with a warning in a heavy scrawl about dosage. The woman and baby were the same.



He sat back on his heels, the hot lump now clawing at his chest. “You gave up,” he rasped, his voice thick and gravelly. Tears burned at the corners of his eyes. He looked away from the three bodies, out toward the surrounding buildings, because he couldn’t bear to see their accusatory faces. “I could have saved you, if I’d known you were here. I could have pulled you out.”

He stood suddenly, stalked away as the tears escaped and ran down his face. He choked back a small cry. “How many more of you were there?” he whispered to himself, turning as he gazed out at the planes of the shard that surrounded him. “How many were trapped here that we didn’t know about? Didn’t save?”

Because they had saved some. In the first few months after the Shattering, he’d explored the nearer shards, pulled others from their grasp. But then the bands of survivors that had formed and begun taking over the rest of the city had become too dangerous. Everyone had been fighting for a place in the new landscape. Those who had joined their group at the University, and others who had found them afterward, had been forced to leave their outpost in Erenthrall and focus on surviving the winter in the Hollow. They’d taken what supplies they had gathered with them and had only returned recently.

He forced himself to look at the sprawling figures again. “There was no time to look for other survivors in the shards.” The distortion was too large. He would never have been able to search it all, even if they’d never been forced out. He may never have found them even then, especially since time within this shard was moving faster than outside. They might have killed themselves long before he got here.

But it was small consolation.

He returned to stand over the small family, over the second man who must have found

them here, perhaps after scrounging for more supplies, and chosen the dagger over poison. He could do nothing for them now. But he whispered a small prayer—he didn't even know which god they may have worshipped—and then checked out the supplies they'd gathered, stashing a few of the jars in his new satchel with the medicine.

Shrugging the haunting image of the bodies and the fountains—and the desperation and despair it signified—aside, he moved through the streets and edged back toward the shard's outside face. But the pack leader had placed Wolves here as well. Keeping to the shadows, he checked all of the streets leading out of the shard to the outside world and found Wolves on guard at each.

Frowning, he retreated deeper inside the shard. Apparently, he'd have to find another way out, which meant traveling through additional shards on either side.

Sucking in a deep breath, the face of a shard glowing with a pale amber light immediately before him, he pushed forward into the wall.

He didn't relish what he'd find at all. Not after what he'd found here.