



WANDERER OF WORLDS
BOOK ONE

AXIOM

CHAPTERS 1-3

LINDA DELIA
CONLON STRANGE

AXIOM

WANDERER OF WORLDS

The First Three Chapters

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE EXTRACT

The first three chapters will introduce you to the three main characters of the series. Throughout our eight book series, we will follow the paths of Daeson, Synjan and Hawke. They will connect in more ways than you will first realise, as their lives are intertwined. The first three chapters will also give you a good feel for the book—after reading them, you'll know whether you want to read the rest. We love our story and early feedback has been overwhelmingly positive so we're looking forward to entertaining many readers.

You'll find that there's also a prologue included. The writing style for this won't quite match the rest of the book and if you're a prologue skipper, rest assured that skipping the prologue won't affect your understanding of what's to come. However, the prologue gives information that we feel will deepen the story and add an extra layer to the overall experience. A connection to the prologue will also be made a little further into the series.

Each book will be released in six month increments. If you end up loving this book, you can get the first one now and won't have long to wait for the second.

Thank you for reading this introduction. We hope you enjoy the sneak preview.

—D & L

PROLOGUE

The Fold

BEYOND the crowded forest, the world felt huge beneath a watercolour sky. The air changed as shadowed coolness yielded to the heat of sun-soaked grassland. Father and son headed up a gentle slope and the wiry nine year old boy marvelled as warmth enveloped him, prickling the hairs on his arms. The separation between forest and field was only a few steps, spongy black earth quickly surrendering to the firmer sod.

As the grasses thickened and swarmed around their legs, he took one last look back at the trees. They stood like a council of men huddled together to glower their good riddance at the interlopers. A day's walk through the dark and densely-populated forest left an aroma of dirt and decomposing foliage on his clothes. The way had been gruelling and the footing erratic, but the boy hadn't noticed. He'd wielded sword-like sticks and leapt off fallen logs, crawled up steep embankments to escape untold savagery and hunkered in plant-choked gullies to wait for imagined enemies to pass. The dappled light and cries of retreating animals held many possibilities of adventure.

Dusk coiled above them, uncaring that they hadn't yet found a suitable place to camp for the night. His father's words became clipped, urging him to move faster, and a spark of nervous anticipation flared in the boy's belly. It was now that the long day spent walking took its toll. His muscles ached and he couldn't keep his hands still. He relied on his father's legs to mow a path for him through the long, tangled grass. Balmy breezes swept across the plains like the intermittent attentions of a toddler, tugging this way and that, and he was similarly distracted.

His father was a giant leading the way and the boy's worshipful gaze was always drawn back to him. He walked fearlessly, his pack laden with trinkets and souvenirs from the many worlds they'd travelled through, bouncing beguilingly with every step. His own pack weighed a quarter of what his father's did and he carried only his belongings. The responsibility of the necessary things, the mementos and the memories, were his father's alone to bear.

In that early evening twilight, the magic of a world undergoing palpable change thrilled him. His gaze moved from the grass he couldn't see over to the reds, pinks and golds streaking the sky above. He inhaled deeply the scent of warm spring air, of grass and life carried on the wind.

The boy reached up and watched his hand skim along the tall grass. The field was many different colours ranging from green to dark brown, though it gave an overall impression of wheat. This was no farmer's field gone fallow for they were in the middle of nowhere. There was not another person for hundreds of miles—he knew this for he saw it in his mind as surely as he saw the mottled colours in the meadow around him.

He looked up in time to avoid running into a saucepan strapped onto his father's pack. He squinted up past his mentor's broad, strong shoulders to the back of his head, trying to figure out why his father had come to so sudden a stop. The boy questioned him, a quizzical frown upon his brow, and when he got no response he knew something was very wrong. His father never ignored him, never failed him. Walled in by grass and his father ahead, the child couldn't see and panic took root. It shot adrenaline through his veins and left bitterness in his mouth.

It was the first time he'd tasted fear.

Confusion swamped him, holding him momentarily inert and then he pushed past, ploughing his way through the grass until he saw his father's profile; he was rigid, his expression tight and his skin pale. His gaze fixed on whatever lay ahead of them.

The child turned to look, swiping ruthlessly at the few blades of grass still blocking his view. When the way was clear, he beheld a scene he wasn't prepared for. He whimpered a disquieted noise deep in his throat and it was then his father finally looked down and noticed him. With a gruff cry, he wrapped a large hand around his son's bony shoulder but it was too late to shield him. His hand stilled, not jerking the child away but gripping him reassuringly as they stared at the carnage together.

Twelve corpses were splayed out in a circular pattern before them. The eerily flattened part of the sward they'd fallen upon was also a circle, the grasses laying down in one direction. It was like a giant board had been thumped down and swept around in a smooth motion so these people could be sacrificed upon the natural altar.

The wind changed direction and blew the stink of putrefaction at father and son. They gagged their distaste, turning their heads and covering their noses and mouths. These corpses weren't newly-dead, they were days old. Turning back when the wind shifted once more (though still with his hand over his mouth), the boy scrutinised the scene, unable to speak past the horror clogged in his throat.

A moving black cloud pulsed around each cadaver—swarms of flies, buzzing excitedly with the promise of maggots soon to be hatching in softening, rotting flesh.

Two of the corpses held hands. Some were young, others old. There were dark-skinned people and fair, men and women, short, tall, fat and thin. There was nothing overt linking them, nothing obvious that was the same except they were all dead...with their eyes open. They looked mutely at the darkening sky as if beseeching their fate.

The boy knew nothing of cults, of religious zealotry, of fanaticism so intense it might drive a singularly-minded group of disparate people to commit mass suicide. He was too young for such concepts. He knew about Wanderers,

though, that there were twelve powers and that when all twelve were combined, something magical and mystical happened. A Wanderer would be transported to Endworld, to the World of Worlds. There were twelve people before him (he knew, because he'd counted them a great many times to avoid looking too closely at their features) and his faith was stirred by it.

The closer he looked, the more signs that these were Wanderers took shape. Similar equipment to his father's pack were tied to their bags and backpacks. Most had placed their gear on the ground by their feet before their demise, though a couple still wore theirs and were arched over them like bridges of death. Colourless, odorous death curved over their worldly possessions.

This was a dead Wanderer Fold.

He saw no wounds, no bloodstains on clothes, no severed limbs or damage done. If it weren't for the grey tint to their flesh, their blank looks and stillness, they would look like whole—and possibly even healthy—people. What could have caused them to die? There seemed to be no foul play whatsoever...yet *something* had killed them.

His father removed his hand and placed his backpack on the ground. With a few neat flicks of leather ties and some clasps he removed a bandanna and held it over his nose and mouth. He then straightened and strode resolutely forth into the circle. Without speaking, he bent down and rifled through the pack of the nearest body, one hand holding the cloth to his face, the other searching for anything useful.

A cocoon of cold encased the boy and he looked away. The scudding clouds drew his attention and he became ice, too numb to be tainted by this moment. Later, he would understand his father's practicality and when he was older, he would scavenge for himself, wherever he happened upon the opportunity to do so. For now, he simply watched the sky change colours, frozen inside his glassy skin, his heart cold. He wondered, as he looked up, if the spirits of

the dead Fold looked down upon them and whether they applauded or were appalled by these two Wanderers. If they really *had* reached the World of Worlds, surely they wouldn't care? He didn't wish them to be cursed for his father's insensitivity, so that was how he preferred to think of things.

The wind gusted towards him again and brought with it fresh odours of damnation. Suddenly, the boy was not sure of anything beyond feeling scared, alone and fragile, though he didn't have the words to express such complex vulnerability. All he could do was pluck fretfully at the grass seeds and steal glances at his father, needing to reassure himself that his family was still the constant he could rely on when everything else unravelled.

By the time the last streaks of light faded from the sky, the pair had moved on to make camp as far away as possible. They'd left behind a sight that wouldn't fade from their memories and carried with them a malodour that had invaded their pores. There was also an awful, undeniable knowledge that burdened their newly-disillusioned souls; innocence could die as surely and swiftly as the living.

And a Wanderer Fold meant death.

CHAPTER ONE

Hard Truths

HE'D been stuck in the roof for hours. Armpit deep in thatching, Daeson's hands ached from holding on. Sweat plastered his brown hair to his face, tickling and itching but he couldn't let go to swipe it aside. His legs dangled limp in the cottage; he imagined them as some peculiar farming accessory, like something to swap out when the original set broke. Perhaps this strange fantasy was an indication of his suffering from heat stroke. He doubted it—it was only morning, though late. The temple bells had rung twice as he'd watched the sun move higher into the sky. It hadn't reached its peak yet but it would soon, and he was thirsty.

Daeson was between escape attempts, conserving strength and feeling sorry for himself. He would not yell for help. The townsfolk already looked at him with pity, he didn't want them hiding smiles as well. Some of them wouldn't bother, just as they hadn't bothered to avert their eyes.

Failure, their stares accused.

Daeson grunted, determined not to let his mind trek a well-worn path. He had to focus on getting out. He'd been an avid tree climber as a young boy but he'd also been a skinny lad. Now he was much heavier. His bulk was mostly muscle though, so he should be strong enough to free himself except he had no leverage. Stuck as he was, it would be much easier to allow himself to fall the rest of the way rather than climb up. Letting go wasn't feasible. He'd wrenched his shoulder when he'd caught himself and didn't want to risk hurting himself further.

His shoulder wasn't hurting anymore so he might've been lucky enough to escape worse injury. No sense testing

his luck further. Daeson felt like a pawn in a battle between Malice, the God of ill fortune and Tamsin, the Goddess of good fortune. He could be the primary character in a Lesson, who'd blundered his way into a situation so dire that deities would argue over the outcome.

Stop imagining and start acting, Daeson. Get your future out of the hands of the Gods and into your own.

His father's voice in his head. A practical man, he'd never had time for the fancies of a son that wanted to name the farm animals, to grow the crops he liked to eat rather than what brought the most coin and who climbed trees when tasked to collect firewood. An old memory sparked, bearing the answer to his escape.

How'd you come down from that tree when you climbed up this one?

There'd been a mixture of confusion and pride in his father's voice. Daeson remembered the question because of its different tone. His father was often gruff, more so when he had to deal with their neighbour Kurgan. Neither Daeson nor his father had respect for a man who saw his land as just business.

He thought about that day. Daeson had leapt from one tree to another because the one he'd climbed had branches too far apart to reach. Swinging out, he'd hooked his knees over a bough in the next tree and let go of the first so he could hang upside down.

Daeson renewed his hold on the roof and swung his legs back and forth. It put more of a burden on his arms but he held on grimly. The momentum of swinging forward threatened to pull him the rest of the way through the roof, but swinging back made him feel like he could escape the hole. He could hear the reeds creaking under his weight.

At the topmost arc, when he felt the lightest, he heaved himself up to his belly and flopped onto the roof. A face full of straw was almost welcome, though the stuff that flew up his nose wasn't. He was exhausted and wanted to rest but also didn't want to spend any more time on the roof. He

made himself crawl to the ladder.

The small collection of thatching bundles and twine waiting for him on the ground were no longer enough for patching. He grunted his discontent at them and headed for the water pump. The bucket was looped over the spout and inside was a battered cup. He didn't bother pulling it out, he just pumped until the bucket was halfway filled and drank deeply. The rough edge didn't bother him today. He hitched the bucket back onto the spout and wiped an arm across his mouth.

With a sigh, he moved around the cottage and went inside. In the middle of the dirt floor was a scattering of straw and the thick branch that had stuck in the roof last night during the storm. He stepped around it and looked up at the damage he'd caused. The hole didn't look as big as it had felt while he was in it but it was big enough—if he didn't cover it with something, the next rainfall would ruin everything in the cottage. Not that there was anything left to ruin.

Other than the pipe stove to keep himself warm, his bed and a solitary chair, he'd already sold or traded the rest of his furniture to keep the farm going. He realised now that he'd been throwing good coin after bad...there was nothing he could do to save the fields, they were already grown over. From his raised vantage point Daeson had stared at them all morning and been forced to accept the hard truth.

His last hope was his vegetable patch. It was meagre because he'd only planted enough vegetables for himself, but it was fertile and maintainable. He'd swapped half of it over to winter produce and yesterday had noticed the rest were ready for harvest. He could divide them into rations; sell or trade half of them for more thatching or an animal skin. He also had chickens to sell but knew better than to part with them, they still produced a good quantity of eggs.

It was too quiet. He hadn't heard his chickens all morning. He hadn't even thought about them. He'd missed their feeding time because he'd been trapped inside the

roof. They should've been making a fuss by now. They were always clucking at one another even when they were fat and happy. His stomach churned. Had they broken free of their cage? Worse...stolen by foxes?

Daeson hurried out of the cottage. The door springs pulled it shut behind him with a squeal as he headed for the coop. The path rounded the vegetable patch and that was where he stopped. The churn in his belly became a tight knot and his legs turned watery, threatening to spill him onto the ground.

What happened? He didn't understand. What happened? Repetitive thoughts on top of vivid comprehension on top of broiling anger. He shook with the force of his emotions as he surveyed what lay before him.

Clumps of dirt and tufts of roots were scattered on the ground. No more neat leafy rows of spinach and kale, no more stalks of carrot and radish, no more growing heads of broccoli. Just smashed remains, broken stalks and piles of garbage. Everything had been purposefully ruined. Nothing was taken, all was destroyed. With his heartbeat drumming in his ears, Daeson walked stiffly to the edge of the patch. Every step closer felt heavier.

Huge holes were scooped out of the dirt; every bulb had been removed, every stalk pulled out and snapped. There was nothing left.

Who—? His mind gave him the answer before it finished forming the question.

Kurgan. Who else had motive for making his farm life difficult? Who else wanted him to sell his land? There was nobody he knew to be capable of such a deed except for the hard-faced farmer that his father had warned Daeson to be wary of.

Despair soured in his mouth and sank into his belly.

The chickens!

"No, no, no," he begged, turning and breaking into a run. He reached the coop at speed but dropped to his knees at the devastation that greeted him there.

Three limp, brown feathered bodies lay prostrate on the ground among smashed eggs. The yolk and albumen had long since seeped into the dirt, but the ruined shells were enough for Daeson to interpret what happened. He'd heard them squawking in his dream. In reality, he'd probably half woken, but it was well before even a farmer's early rising. The chickens had sounded an alarm and he'd only stirred enough for their screeches to register in his sleeping fantasy. The vegetable patch was planted snug against the cottage wall and he'd heard nobody stomping about outside.

Last night it had been storming, providing cover for the culprit and Daeson's farm was remote. The only person that might've seen what happened was his neighbour.

Doubt gnawed. If Kurgan was the only potential witness to the crime, why bother to hide beneath the cover of a storm?

Daeson knelt at the coop staring at three dead chickens until the temple bells brought him to the present. The final service was held at noon and he'd missed his usual mid-morning one. His daily routine had been severely altered.

His grief was choking him. He had an intense desire to escape the farm. Daeson hadn't been raised to run from his problems but he felt overwhelmed by them. Perhaps a few hours away would put things in perspective.



While walking down the sloped trail that led to the village, Daeson saw Kurgan at the bottom. He broke into a jog, righteousness burning hotly at his core. Would his neighbour say nothing? Perhaps he would feign innocence.

Daeson caught up where the dirt road ended and the cobbled street began. The clomp of his boots alerted Kurgan because the brawny farmer turned to see his approach. There wasn't a smile of greeting on his face for

Kurgan wasn't the kind of man to smile unnecessarily. Recently Daeson had become the same.

"Why did you do it?" Daeson accused, bypassing any polite chatter or explanation. Kurgan would know exactly what he was talking about. "Did you think I would give in and sell the farm to you?"

Kurgan's thick brows lowered. He placed his hands on his hips while he looked Daeson over, making an imposing figure. Though he was taller by a hand—an accomplishment, since Daeson himself stood a little over six foot—Daeson wasn't intimidated. He believed he was looking at a coward who would sabotage his farm in the middle of the night.

Doubt persisted. Why would Kurgan make a move last night, of all nights? It made no sense, except nobody else wanted him to sell up and leave.

"What are you talking about, boy?"

When Kurgan spoke, it wasn't thundering anger covering up shame like Daeson expected, but a question.

"You know well what I'm talking about. You're the one who tore it up!" At Kurgan's silent stare, Daeson continued. "I never figured you for a coward, but what you did—"

"Hold your tongue!"

Now Daeson could see the anger that he'd expected at the start. Didn't most bullies hide their fear through aggression? That's what his father had told him.

"You'd best not be calling me a coward," Kurgan warned, one of his hands moving off his hip to point a finger not far from Daeson's face. Daeson slapped it aside, earning a look of disbelief.

"I'll call you by whatever name you earn. You came while I was asleep to tear up my garden. What else should I call a man who sneaks around at night?" he said.

"Why would you think I would?" Kurgan asked gruffly.

"Who else stands to gain, except you? I might not have seen you with my eyes but I can use my brain."

"Then use your brain to think of someone else."

Kurgan turned to leave. Daeson reached for his arm except he didn't make contact. There were some village folk staring at him curiously, likely watching them because of all the shouting. Daeson wasn't comfortable airing his grievances in public but he wanted Kurgan to admit his guilt. Even if Kurgan denied it, it would be as good as admitting it because Daeson knew when people were lying.

He would catch up with Kurgan after the service and question him again.



Farmers and villagers filed into the temple for its final service, accepting the bread rolls handed them by the acolyte at the door. One by one they dropped the rolls into the fire pit as a sacrifice to Ravina, Goddess of the Harvest. Daeson smuggled his bread into his tunic, where it pressed like guilt against his skin.

He isolated himself by sitting in the backmost pew. Soft sounds of greetings and whispered conversations became a hiss as words bounced off stone floor and walls. He imagined his name was among the sounds because of his stolen roll. He met their stares, brave only because he wanted to search their expressions for knowledge. The person who'd ruined his vegetable patch and killed his chickens would be unable to meet his gaze. He didn't know why he was bothering, he already had his answer in Kurgan...except the farmer hadn't addressed the accusation, and hadn't *looked* guilty. Would a man with no conscience show regret? Daeson needed either a confession or denial before he could know the truth and act on it.

His father had said only those who were weak would take the path of revenge. Daeson struggled with that advice; he saw no justice in allowing someone who'd done wrong go unpunished. He was old enough not to argue but young enough to think he knew better. Soon after, his

father had succumbed to an illness, leaving Daeson to wish he'd paid more attention and respect.

When the time for service neared, Cleric Faelin appeared from a side door and looked over his congregation. Daeson averted his gaze, feeling the cleric's eyes boring into his soul. Did he know Daeson hadn't sacrificed his bread? Was the cleric condemning him for his hunger? His appetite had been a gnawing thing, begging Daeson not to waste food on a ritual. He'd been waiting for the right time to shove the bread into his mouth, but his appetite wilted under that iron gaze. Daeson sneaked a look upward, relieved to see the cleric standing behind the podium and looking at someone else.

Cleric Faelin was an imposing man, more so when he stood behind the podium shouting about paying dues. He was striking in his dark blue and yellow robes. His expression changed according to his thoughts. He looked kind when he smiled, cruel when he frowned, and thoughtful when he listened.

Speaking in a clear, booming voice, the cleric began with his thoughts on Ravina. She brought no festivals or feasts but demanded respect for the soil that provided the bounty of life.

Daeson sought out where Kurgan sat. He thought it blasphemous, that the man should come here this morning after what he'd done last night. When Daeson looked back to the front again, he was startled to meet the cleric's gaze.

Next temple service heralded the beginning of winter. Supfest was mentioned and his stomach growled. Daeson waited until the cleric looked away and worked his roll to the open collar of his tunic, where he could sneak a few bites. The crust was hard and scratched his gums but the inside was soft and delicious. He chewed as discreetly as possible. Eating the roll made him feel impossibly hungry, awakening the beast in his stomach.

He barely listened to the service. Towards the end, the collection plate was passed around to pay for Supfest.

Daeson was concerned that he had nothing to put in it but the plate didn't reach him. Sitting so far behind everyone had caused the townsfolk to either forget or overlook his presence.

When everyone stood to sing a farewell to Gli, the departing Autumnal God, Daeson snuck away. He thought he'd managed to escape without notice except the acolyte was out the front. Daeson bid him farewell but the acolyte stopped him.

"Cleric Faelin would like to see you."

Daeson felt his eyes widen, his thoughts leaping to the half-eaten bread still shoved down his tunic. He considered pulling it out and apologising, but the acolyte had turned and was looking and pointing toward the path that went around the side of the temple, to the back.

"You can wait in the kitchen and help yourself. Cleric Faelin will be some time before he joins you. He has to farewell everyone first."

Daeson stared at the acolyte who continued looking and pointing down the path instead of at him. It made the request more urgent. The promise of food beckoned. Daeson considered throwing his half-eaten roll into the fire pit as he passed, but believed it would be a greater insult to the Harvest Goddess. He also had nothing for her to bless. She hadn't failed him; he'd failed to keep up with her.

He passed the door that led to Cleric Faelin's den. Daeson had been in that room only a few times in his life. The first time he'd been so young he was barely walking; he remembered a cluttered room and the smell of wood varnish. His father and the cleric had explained to him about his mother, that she'd gone to the Endworld and would not return. Their words had little impact though he did recall sitting in a mud puddle many moons later and crying because his mother had gone away without him.

The second time was not long after his fourteenth season; winter had come and gone, taking his father with it. The den still smelled of wood polish and the room remained cluttered. The only markings he could make

were the ones that formed his name, and the cleric had him signing it over and over to documents that had been explained to him and quickly forgotten in his grief. He'd watched the cleric press his seal to wax at the bottom, officiating them. Then they'd both walked to the cemetery where his father went into the ground beside his mother.

Willem and Marget, together at last.

Stop.

It was hard not to mourn everything at once. His dead parents. His ruined farmland. His few possessions. His murdered chickens. His destroyed vegetable patch.

When he entered the kitchen and beheld a bountiful fruit bowl on the countertop, his mood changed dramatically. Daeson rushed past the long wooden table and its benches to get to it. Greedily he plucked out figs, peaches, nectarines and plums. He ate two of each before finishing his bread roll to counter the sweetness of the fruit.

The cold storage box in the corner caught his eye. Fruit was fine but meat was better.

When Cleric Faelin came to collect him, Daeson was finishing his third ham and cheese sandwich. He shoved the last piece into his mouth, much too big for a single bite, and had trouble chewing. His face grew hot at his dilemma and when the cleric held out his hand, Daeson wiped his fingers on his tunic before taking it.

"No need to rush your meal," the cleric said kindly, pumping Daeson's arm in a firm handshake. Dressed in his finery, it was hard not to feel intimidated by the cleric's presence. "You look as though the weight of the world were upon your shoulders."

Daeson swallowed in large chunks, his throat protesting what was being forced down it.

"Maybe not the world, but the farm is," he replied. He could hear the waver in his voice and attributed it to the difficult digestion. He had no such excuse for the tightness in his chest.

Cleric Faelin nodded, an unreadable expression on his face. It was something for Daeson to marvel at; that he didn't know what this man was thinking. He didn't feel judged but he also didn't perceive sympathy.

"Follow me."

Daeson had intended to clean up after himself but didn't want to make the cleric wait. Aware of dirty plates and cutlery at his back, he fell into step and they went into his den.

Other than the room feeling cosier, it looked and smelled exactly as Daeson remembered. Every surface was littered with papers or items that Daeson associated with the temple. He closed the door and sat in the closest chair while Cleric Faelin moved around his desk, pausing to hang his robe on a hook. Underneath he wore a simple tunic over pants and Daeson was struck by how ordinary he looked. It was strange to see him dressed in such a way; like catching a person on the privy.

He would keep that association to himself.

Cleric Faelin sat and moved a few bundles of papers aside so he and Daeson could chat without things in the way. He leaned forward, linking his fingers before asking a baffling question.

"You're a winter babe, aren't you?"

It was so unexpected that Daeson's response took longer than it should've.

"Yes," he confirmed.

"How many winters have you seen, Daeson?"

"Uh, this coming winter will be my sixteenth."

"Old enough to understand that failure can be inevitable, no matter how much we fight it."

Outrage swelled in Daeson's chest and worked its way up his neck like bile, hot and acrid.

"I haven't failed," he spat through clenched teeth. His fingers curled around the chair arms.

"Willem should not have made you promise to keep the farm. It was too great a burden on a boy."

He felt ambushed by the conversation. In a few simple

words he'd been told he was a failure and his father blamed.

"He was dying! The farm should not have died with him!"

"Calm yourself," Cleric Faelin ordered quietly, holding up his palm. Daeson seethed. His hands ached from holding onto the chair so hard and they'd already been punished today, keeping him from falling through the roof.

"Willem would not have wanted you to throw your life away chasing the impossible. It was the sickness talking."

"It wasn't sickness, it was *truth*," Daeson argued, unable to hold his tongue. He expected another reprimand for his outburst but the cleric quietly assessed him instead.

"You still have your gift," he said. "Then you know that I am speaking truth as well. I knew Willem deeply. He would not have wanted this bleak future for you." After his declaration, the cleric sat back in his chair.

Daeson made his fingers unclench and forced the tension from his shoulders. Relaxing made it easier for the wad of sticky emotions to ball in his throat, forcing his face to scrunch before he covered it with his hands. He fought for control with shuddering breaths. He hated crying. It made him feel like the child he was rather than the man he had become. With a few deft comments, the cleric had disarmed him and made him vulnerable. Had that been his intention all along? Was that why he'd insulted him? The cleric had told Daeson his biggest fears and then forgave them.

Daeson would never blame his father for the promise made, nor would he resent him. If Daeson had been more ruthless early on, made better decisions about the farm, or asked for help instead of running it into the ground because he was too proud...

"I never understood why you didn't sell the farm to Kurgan. I know he made an offer worthy of the property."

The sentence distracted him from his emotional battle. He removed his hands to stare at the cleric doubtfully. Was

this another trick? Being a cleric meant he oversaw everyone's documents, mediated deals and understood how people did business. Surely he knew what kind of man Kurgan was?

"Kurgan is a cheat," Daeson said. He anticipated that he would be interrupted but Faelin remained impassive. "His first offer was well below the value of the farm."

"Any wry businessman would be ready to take advantage of a fool. You proved your mettle and he returned with a fairer price."

"But it's not fair. It's repulsive to take advantage of someone. I was barely fourteen, how could I know what the farm was worth? It's only because he lied about it being a fair price that saved me."

The cleric nodded his understanding but had no response or explanation. Daeson wanted to ask if he would've allowed such an unfair transaction to go ahead but knew there was no point. The cleric wasn't supposed to mediate. His role was to oversee.

Daeson couldn't stopper his anger. "Kurgan is a criminal and should be marked."

"That is a harsh penalty for someone offering a low price," Faelin pointed out.

"Not for the offer. He came onto my property last night, in the middle of the storm, and tore up my vegetable patch and killed my chickens!"

The outburst felt ridiculous in the silence that followed but the cleric looked shocked. Daeson was bitterly satisfied with that.

"You say it was Kurgan as though you know," the cleric said carefully. "Did you see him?"

"Well, no, but—"

Cleric Faelin raised his hand again and closed his eyes in the same moment. It was a silencing gesture and Daeson complied even though he was feeling wronged. The cleric should be horrified at Kurgan's behaviour, not defending him.

"You should not make accusations of others without

knowing for sure," he was told.

"Who else would—"

"Huphuphup!"

Daeson blinked in the face of the ridiculous noise the cleric had uttered.

"A heinous crime indeed," the cleric agreed. He linked fingers again. This seemed to be Faelin's favourite position.

Being silenced and then facing the cleric's superior expression was aggravating. His thoughts turned contemptuous.

"Perhaps you should take this as a sign from Ravina, that you are not meant for farming like your father, but should forge your own path."

"This isn't a sign from the *Goddess*," Daeson argued, bordering on blasphemy. Once again he relished the shock on Faelin's face, but this time he continued. "This is about a man being vengeful because I didn't sell him the farm and he wants my land cheap!"

He hadn't seen it with his eyes but he knew it in his heart. Nobody else had motive and Kurgan had made many offers. First Willem had told Kurgan no and then Daeson. Perhaps the frustration had become too great for their neighbour to take and he decided to remove all choice.

He would starve and he had no coin for food. Even though he was saying and thinking as much, the force of his loss still hadn't sunk in. He was sure it would tonight, when he went to bed hungry.

"Kurgan didn't vandalise your farm, Daeson." The words were gentle and matter-of-fact. Daeson's gaze lifted to the cleric who finally looked sympathetic to his plight. "He has long since given up on your land. He is negotiating a deal with the Briggs family now."

Daeson could feel surprise on his face. The Briggs farm was an inferior plot of land with a sharp angle to it that made planting arduous. They grew olive trees, also. What would Kurgan do with olives?

"So you see, he hasn't forced your hand. You forced

his.”

I don't care, Daeson wanted to say, but couldn't. His tongue was fixed to the roof of his mouth and he huffed. Apparently he *did* care.

“Have you any coin to buy more seed with?”

“I have nothing.”

Shame suffocated him. Running the farm had changed his personality, he could feel his insides twisting with stress. Maybe he wasn't a farmer after all.

“What are your plans?” Faelin asked.

“I have none,” Daeson replied, his voice breaking. What word had the cleric used to describe his future?

Bleak.

He felt it now, that bleakness. It stole through him, numbing his mind and body. His heartbeat echoed in his ears, making it hard to concentrate on what the cleric was saying.

“Perhaps you could sell the farm and purchase a house in the village? There will always be a need for a pair of strong hands in Cloverlea. You would easily find seasonal work.”

“There is nobody who can afford the farm, save Kurgan,” Daeson said, giving Cleric Faelin a wary look.

“Yes, it is unfortunate that the one man you're not comfortable selling your land to is the only one with the means. Have you considered travelling elsewhere such as Stonehearth, to entice a buyer for your farm?”

“Uh, no.”

He hadn't thought of leaving Cloverlea to look for a buyer. He doubted he could find one now, the farm was a mess that would take a lot of work to salvage. But there was hope, and Daeson clung to it.

“Perhaps someone there dreams of moving to a small community. You could sell your farm and also your services as a farmhand. Then you would have some coin at your disposal and see your farmland restored to its former glory.”

The solution wasn't perfect but it was as close as he

could come. There was only one obstacle in his way.

“I don’t have enough supplies to travel with.”

He didn’t need a horse or mule to carry his things—all he needed were his feet—but it would be foolish to leave without camping supplies. He had no equipment beyond a water flask. He would still need food rations, a bedroll and tent, and coin to pay the tolls when he neared Stonehearth. It was a typical method for a city’s guard to keep out vagrants and thieves; if a traveller couldn’t afford the toll, it stood to reason that they wouldn’t amount to much within the city’s walls.

“You should take the land ownership document with you. I will also give you the contents of this morning’s first collection.”

Daeson was aghast. He’d never accepted anyone’s charity and he wasn’t about to start now.

“Cleric, no, it’s too much.”

“The collections are to help those in need or who have a wrong done unto them. Are you not both these things?”

He wanted to deny it but couldn’t. He watched the cleric produce a small golden key that was stitched to the cuff of his shirt, and unlock a deep drawer nestled among the bookshelves. He reached in and pulled out an overflowing pouch.

“It’s too much.”

“Huphup!” Cleric Faelin made the noise again to silence Daeson’s protests. “Such an argumentative young man. I hope this is not the usual way you show respect?”

Daeson felt his cheeks grow hot with embarrassment and accepted the pouch filled with coins. He wanted to open it up and peer inside but knew the action would be inappropriate. He looped the leather thong through his belt holes and was impressed with the sensation of weight on his side.

Cleric Faelin took a moment to produce a document with a waxed seal on the bottom. The insignia of four arrows belonged to the Goddess Laliko, for she

represented expansion and her seal was used on official property deeds stamped by the temples.

“Whether you are able to read or not, you shouldn’t negotiate without a cleric or justice present.”

“Thank you, Cleric Faelin,” Daeson said dutifully, taking the paper. It already had a crease in the middle. Daeson re-folded it along the crease and slipped it under his tunic, keeping it flat against his chest.

“I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this,” the cleric stated with a shake of his head.

“That what wouldn’t?” Daeson asked, thinking Cleric Faelin might have been speaking to himself.

The cleric’s dark eyes found Daeson and regarded him in a way that Daeson didn’t care for. Uncertainty trickled along his spine.

“Stonehearth is not a place for gentle hearts like yours. I pray that you find your buyer and are brave enough to follow your dream. May Portos be your guide.”

Portos, one of the old Gods, the ancient beings that had multiple roles and therefore blessings could mean multiple things. Portos ruled not just destiny, but also adventure, wise decisions and free will as an illusion.

The blessing indicated to Daeson that his time with the cleric was over. He stood up, said thank you and farewell, and left the den, softly shutting the door behind him.

He moved up the path, heading for the front of the temple. After a few steps he came upon a sight that slowed his feet and offered a welcome distraction.

The acolyte was crouching at the temple’s pump—a clever contraption that worked on two cogs and spun on a belt to keep the water flowing—scrubbing his hands raw. Daeson stood near him but the acolyte didn’t notice, he was engrossed in his task.

“Have you been doing dirty work?” Daeson joked.

The acolyte sneered at the pun but when he lifted his gaze to see who’d spoken to him, he did a double take and shot to his feet like a man haunted. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!” he blustered, his voice lifting an

octave.

He was lying. Daeson knew it but didn't know what it meant. He'd only asked about dirty work but the reaction he witnessed was excessive enough to heighten his instinct.

"Did you kill my chickens?"

He hadn't considered the acolyte might be a part of the crime, but it made sense that someone would pay him off to do the deed. Why go running around at night in a storm when you have a low-paid acolyte handy to do it for you? Any bribe would seem generous.

He half-expected an expression of confusion but what he got were rounder, fearful eyes that darted to and fro, unable to meet Daeson's gaze. Coldness seeped through Daeson's gut. The pouch of coins felt heavier on his belt loop.

"Who told you to?" Daeson demanded, wanting to frighten this weedy little creature into giving up the real culprit.

Was it Kurgan? his mind asked.

"Was it Cleric Faelin?" his mouth said.

The pump stopped gushing water. The acolyte's red hands trembled and he folded them into his armpits. Perhaps he was warming them up but the gesture looked defensive. Daeson waited for denial, for a question, for anything. He received silence. The acolyte obviously knew he'd said too much already.

Did he know that Daeson had a gift for truth? The only way the acolyte *could* know was if Cleric Faelin told him. Revealing such knowledge would be a betrayal. Even if he didn't know, only guilty people kept quiet.

He had to stop himself jumping to conclusions. He needed the truth.

Daeson stormed back down the path and threw open the door to the cleric's den. Faelin had been writing and looked up to meet his glare.

"It was you! All this time you sat across from me,

pretending to help me, and it was you! You sent him!"

Daeson's heart pounded violently in his chest because of the confrontation and the fear he might be wrong. The cleric placed the quill back in its ink pot and slowly stood.

"What good would it do, to wither away on a farm because of a hasty promise to the man who raised you?"

The confession was very strange but Daeson couldn't focus on anything except the fact the cleric had turned on him.

"Did Kurgan talk you into it?" he said, stepping forward. The cold was at his back, causing the papers inside the room to ripple or steal away from their piles.

"Foolish boy. You fixate on Kurgan because of Willem's rivalry with the man. He has nothing to do with this. He is better than you realise, for honouring your secret."

"He doesn't know about my gift, unless you told him."

"I don't mean your gift for truth. Your *other* secret." The cleric stared at Daeson who didn't know what to say. "Where do you think your gift came from? Have you not thought on it at all?"

"I'm not here to talk about my gift. You took my farm away from me!"

"Your farm was already gone. You were drowning, holding onto a thin reed that would not last. All I did was take it from you so you could swim."

The metaphors felt ugly in his gut, swirling in that strange space between truth and lies. Silence ruled the space between them as Daeson boggled at the cleric. How could he stand there so impassively after taking away what little Daeson had? How was he not on his knees begging for forgiveness?

"I have no other secrets," he said finally, wanting the silence to break.

"Kurgan knows you were not Willem and Marget's babe. He promised to lie about them being your parents, so the Flag Guards wouldn't take you to a workhome."

The shock ran deep, as though someone had scooped his insides out, leaving behind a hollow shell. His chest

tightened, making it difficult to breathe. His hearing muted, noises sounding as though they were coming through a barrel. The cleric was still talking but Daeson was too busy trying to make himself feel normal. Darkness entered his vision before seeping away. When the sensation passed, it took everything with it except the feeling of being gutted.

Willem wasn't his father. Marget wasn't his mother. Kurgan and the cleric both knew it. Had Cleric Faelin thought Daeson knew or was he telling him the truth to disarm him? Did it even matter what the Cleric was trying to do? His intentions were impure, either way.

Daeson's mouth filled with spittle that he balled with his tongue and spat onto the den's floor, the act cursing the temple and all those within it.

"Daeson!" His name was uttered in a mixture of disgust and horror. He was satisfied with the reaction he got but it didn't make him feel better.

"You deserve it," Daeson said, his voice shaking. He left the den and moved up the path.

This time the acolyte was nowhere nearby.

CHAPTER TWO

Bunker Visit

AS soon as the telephone rang, Synjan knew who it would be. Resignation filled her as she lifted the sleek white handset.

"Hello?"

"Is that Miss Walker?"

"Yes."

"This is Endam Hartley at the south branch of Gredann City Bank. Your deposit wasn't made this morning."

The man on the other end of the line sounded uncertain. He'd been warned to use caution when calling this number and to be succinct. Risk was implied. He was also bribed generously for performing this task.

"Thank you," Synjan replied and hung up. Her lips twisted as she contemplated the news. A glance at her wristwatch told her it was eleven in the morning; more than an hour after the day's money should have been banked. It was the third time in as many weeks that she'd received this call and she'd promised herself this would be the last. The pad of her index finger tapped on the cool plastic of the phone. A voice nearby pulled her from her thoughts.

"Who was it?" Ellis asked. He stood at the head of the hallway that led to the rear of their home. He'd come from his bedroom and his green eyes were alert as he looked her over, no doubt identifying her pensive mood by her body language.

"The bank," Synjan told him, unsurprised when his lips thinned.

Ellis headed into the living area, stepping off polished wood and onto the cream carpet of the sunken lounge. He moved around the low square coffee table where the pieces

of an unfinished jigsaw hinted at snowy mountains and log cabins. The wraparound sofa's suede cushions were plush and he sank into them, crossing his legs and assessing her.

Synjan went to him. Though the sun was climbing to its zenith and filling the large, open plan space with a golden glow through the skylight, Synjan didn't feel warmed.

"So," he said mildly, his voice pleasant as he stretched his right arm along the low back of the couch. His expression was expectant.

She could only stare at him, not wanting to admit defeat yet unable to think of another way to salvage this disaster.

Ellis was a distinguished-looking man, though not classically handsome. The sixty years he'd lived hadn't been kind to his fair complexion, yet the lines on his face lent him character. His close-cropped salt and pepper hair gave him a vital air. He had a square jaw that balanced out the roundness of his balding head and narrow features in between.

His emerald eyes were his most notable attribute. Bright and intelligent, they peered out from behind rimless glasses. When Ellis spoke, people listened and it was mostly because of what they could see shining in those eyes. His voice was rich and deep but it was his *tone* that got people moving.

He always presented himself impeccably, his face cleanly shaven and his clothes immaculate. Today was no exception. Ellis was a man of demanding taste, impossible standards and harsh judgement. Synjan knew what his single word meant, as he'd trained her to know in the eighteen years she'd been with him.

"I'll have to take care of it," she announced, sounding calmer than she felt.

Ellis nodded, running the forefinger and thumb of his left hand along the fold in his pants. "Regrettably," he added, as if that would reassure her.

Synjan's task was confirmed. She pivoted and skirted

around the dining table and headed for her bedroom. It was at the front corner of the three storey house, where she could get the modicum of privacy a single, twenty-four year old woman deserved.

She wasn't in her room long. The denim long pants and brown long-sleeved shirt she had on were suitable but she pulled off her joggers and changed into platform boots. She stood at one hundred and sixty-two centimetres and felt more confident walking into unpredictable situations with extra height.

Next, Synjan attached her bra holster before checking that her small automatic pistol's magazine was fully loaded and the safety was on. She holstered the gun and checked its concealment in a mirror. Her large breasts were the reason a shoulder holster was impractical but they effectively hid the gun. She doubted that she would need to draw the weapon but she wasn't going to risk being without it.

"Good luck," Ellis bade as she passed back through to collect her keys before leaving. Synjan didn't look at him or acknowledge his words. There wasn't anything she could think of to say.

The floor below was dedicated to the running of their business, with a single apartment for their housekeeper. Most visitors to this floor were employees coming to see Synjan. She acted as Ellis' proxy while he remained upstairs.

The second floor's spiral staircase led to the middle of the mechanic's workshop that occupied the ground floor. The stairs were concealed in a large support with a locked door. Select people had a key for this internal entry, most came up the back stairs and knocked. The workshop was a legitimate, family-owned business operating under the name of Minke's Garage. She and Ellis had nothing to do with the company apart from collecting rent each month and occasionally having them service the vehicle Ellis owned and kept garaged there.

Synjan left via the rear of the building. She was pleased

to escape the cacophony of a workshop filled with mechanics banging on engines and yelling to be heard over the whine and zip of the machines they operated.

A wooden bicycle rack was built against the wall, a selection of four rides stowed within. She chose a rusty bicycle that had a basket-style trailer attached to the back. She would need it to get the money to the bank once she picked it up.

Their network of staff and business partners referred to this building most often as 'the Office', rather than their home, and it was a habit Ellis and Synjan had also adopted. The Office wasn't the only residence Ellis owned in Gredann. Six cobbled, hilly streets away was the Bunker and this was where Synjan headed once she pedalled out of the weed-ridden alley that ran between the Office and the row of houses behind it.

The ride to the Bunker required concentration as the streets weren't easy to negotiate on a bike that had seen better days. Nothing made of metal lasted very long in Dockside. The salt in the air ate at everything that wasn't fabricated from wood, plastic or cloth.

There were a few other vehicles moving around on the narrow streets. Most were patrolling Authority open-top vehicles and the rest were small trucks moving goods into or out of the many warehouses within the fishing district.

Chiefly, she needed to dodge pedestrians and she almost came undone at one point when she rounded a corner and an elderly man stepped out in front of her.

"Ho, there!" she cried as she struggled to steer around him. The Dockside roadways were angled towards a drain down their centre and though there were always promises from the Authorities to upgrade the surfaces, the cobbles were missing in some places or the whole thoroughfare was skewed at a steeper angle due to a lack of maintenance. Walkways on the sides of the road were extremely narrow or non-existent, despite the outcry of citizens who were run over more frequently than was

warranted.

The old man stopped and wheezed a laugh at her efforts as she stood on the pedals in order to get the bike around him and up the hill.

Such things didn't happen in Portside or Hill End. The roads in the better parts of the city were smooth and grey with footpaths bordering both sides of every road. This was just one reason the Authorities weren't welcome in Dockside and old timers like the one she'd almost hit spat after saying their name. They were understandably bitter after more than fifty years of broken promises and neglect.

Synjan pulled into Breezy Turn at the top of the hill and coasted to a house about halfway down. There were two sets of stairs that led to different doors in the wide residence; the one on the right had more steps to accommodate the gradient of the land and this was the one she headed for. She angled her bike against the stair railing so it wouldn't roll away, confident that it wouldn't be touched by any of the guttersnipes in the area. Everyone in Dockside knew the Bunker was Ellis'. People didn't steal from him if they valued their health.

Synjan withdrew her keys and walked steadily up the stairs. She let herself in and shut the door behind her as quickly and quietly as she was able. Dust motes floated around her in the darkened entryway. This place had been her second home in Gredann and even now the smell roused a sensation of comfort and familiarity. There was unease too, because there'd also been many traumas here.

To her left were the common living area and kitchen. She knew—because she was experienced and this was a routine she'd performed too often lately—that her target was in there, but she wasn't ready for a confrontation just yet. Instead, she turned right and moved along the turns of the hallway that wound through the dormitory half of the house.

As soon as she was away from the foyer, the large house felt derelict and filthy. There were six shared and single bedrooms of various sizes as well as a few

bathrooms in this half of the house. Synjan wrinkled her nose as she passed pungent toilets and untidy rooms. She was surprised that she didn't meet anyone as there were currently five permanent residents and they should've been returning for lunch. It was obvious that more than just the banking routine wasn't being followed in this dysfunctional household.

There was a tiny office at the very back of the house near the bedroom that used to be hers. When she'd lived here, the office had been the exclusive domain of Ellis and Charli, the woman he'd paid to be the live-in housemother to all the residents.

Charli had also been a savvy businesswoman and she'd been in charge of protecting all the funds Ellis had filtered through the Bunker. Synjan had been fourteen before she'd even had the privilege of looking into this hallowed room, which was little more than a glorified closet. She'd always wanted to see the computer (a very rare item most Docksiders would never sight in their lifetime), but Charli had been fanatical about keeping the office locked and Synjan's inquisitive gaze out.

Now, Synjan searched through her keys with one hand as she approached but tried the knob with the other anyway. The last vestige of hope died within her as it turned and swung inward. She was able to walk straight in.

Seven leather satchels were spread haphazardly across the desk. The computer they were beside was not turned on, indicating their contents hadn't been counted or recorded as they were supposed to have been, before they were banked. She swore as she closed the door and moved to the chair in front of the desk. It squeaked as she sat, giving away her intrusion, but she knew no-one would notice. The days of people taking pride in doing their job well in this house were gone.

It took her half an hour to get everything in order. It was only because she'd used to collect these satchels as a child that she knew who belonged to what. Back then, she'd

been a Runner. She would travel the reaches of Gredann in the early hours of each day and collect the illegitimate funds Ellis' network of employees had accrued in their various pursuits the night before.

From Hill End came the profits of selling drugs and alcohol to rich people—that was two satchels of money. Another was the spoils from contraband and under-the-table gambling at a pair of fancy hotels. Two more satchels held the takings from a gambling ship Ellis owned called *Lady Tamsin*. The last two were filled with cash from various Portside bookies. They were the earnings from illegal dog, cock or bare-knuckle fights held while the city-wide curfew was in effect. The return on such ventures varied widely—especially with the Authorities' bribes factored into the mix—but all turned a nice profit. The night-time events also gave Docksiders the empowering belief that they were rebelling in a small way against the Authority stranglehold on their city. It worked in Ellis' favour from many angles.

Once she was finished, Synjan shut down the computer, gathered the three satchels she'd condensed the money into and headed for the other part of the house. She was aware that her pulse rate had lifted. She didn't want to be here, do this, be the person she was about to be. She never did. But this...this was going to be particularly difficult. She took a few deep breaths to negate the adrenaline seeping into her system. She was anticipating a fight and even though she was confident she would win, she was too highly trained to ignore the many factors that could go against her.

She passed the front door with a regretful glance and stepped into the common room.

Her target was a past friend. Something in her was ashamed to think of her as a 'target', but it was also easier. Kate was sitting at one of the dining tables, her face resting on her arms and her eyes closed. There was a recently used kit not far from her elbow. As Synjan dropped her satchels onto the chair opposite with a deliberate thump, Kate sat

up with a gasp and looked around blearily, taking a few moments to focus on the blonde woman who stood across from her.

"Synjan?" she queried, her voice thick and bewildered.

"Good dawning," Synjan greeted steadily.

A squeal that didn't sound heartfelt came as Kate staggered to her feet. She lurched around the table to embrace Synjan, hugging her brutally. She wore a food-stained singlet, hole-riddled pants and smelled like she hadn't showered for days. Synjan held her breath and kept her face away, allowing the hold to continue for a few seconds before she gently pushed the twig-thin brunette back.

"Whatchoo' doin' here?" Kate asked, her lips drawing back in a travesty of a smile. Once, she'd had beautiful teeth but only two of them remained and the rest were blackened stumps. Her skin was spotted with weeping sores and some muscles in her face had palsied, causing the lovely symmetry of her features to fail. Synjan didn't return the smile and pulled out a chair.

"Sit down," she invited.

Kate did so, making a show of swiping at her knotted, unkempt hair and straightening her grubby clothes. "Wish you'd told me you was comin', I'd've made you some...lunch," she admonished, turning to look at the clock that was on the wall to confirm she had the timing right.

Synjan couldn't bear to look at her too hard so she grabbed the closest chair and set herself up opposite Kate.

"Never mind. I'm not here for lunch."

The money chair was beside them and Synjan nodded at it to draw attention to it as she spoke. Kate's gaze fell to the satchels and she frowned, scratching absently at the skin of her inner elbow. The tiny black holes in it wove an insidious and eloquent trail of tragedy. "I...was just getting to that," she said defensively.

"I already did it. The bank called me an hour ago to say it wasn't in. The office door wasn't even *locked*, Kate,"

Synjan criticised, her voice hardening.

"Well, the house is," the brunette argued hotly.

"You know how many people have a key."

Kate snorted. "It doesn't matter, no-one'd ever steal from *you*."

Synjan blinked. "It's not my money," she reminded the older woman.

"Well, from Ellis then," Kate dismissed, pulling a face and flicking a hand.

"They might, though. Like he says, 'It only takes one step to start a trail'."

"Oh, Synjan," Kate admonished, drawling her name in a manner that suggested they both knew that Synjan was just being some sort of fear-monger. "If anyone took his stuff, he'd just send you to get it back. And you would. O'course." Her grin was partly pride, partly contempt.

"That's not the point. The fact remains you're too relaxed and you're not doing your job. It's not enough. I've warned you twice before. This is the third time."

Kate's expression shifted from cocky to frowning. Her eyelashes fluttered as she processed the meaning behind those quietly spoken words, mouth opening and closing twice. When she finally spoke, her reply was unexpected.

"Remember when you first came here?" she asked brightly, dragging her chair closer to Synjan's.

The sudden movement had Synjan tensing. She remained coiled as Kate's hand came towards her, resisting the urge to brush it aside in order to maintain the civility of the situation. Her shoulder was patted before Kate picked up the tail of Synjan's blonde braid, rubbing it worshipfully between her fingers.

"You were such a tiny little scrap!" she laughed, her bloodshot eyes taking on the shine of memory.

Synjan nodded, not trusting herself to speak because she *did* remember. She remembered how twelve year old Kate had looked; all long legs, taut skin and beautiful, shiny hair. The world was hers and she'd welcomed Synjan openly, becoming her closest girlfriend, advisor about boys

and protector of the six year old orphan. It was difficult to believe the crone before her was that same girl, at just thirty years of age.

“Oh, everybody loved you,” Kate enthused, letting go of Synjan’s hair and pulling her hands back so she could rub them agitatedly between her knees. Her smile was genuine but there was a desperation in her haunted eyes that wasn’t making her easy to watch. “Tiny thing you were.”

Synjan breathed a laugh, wanting to end the awkward bout of reminiscing but feeling like she owed Kate this much.

“Little One, that’s what he called you.”

“He still does, when he’s in a good mood.” Synjan smiled slightly, trying to remember the last time Ellis had used the endearment instead of her name.

“An’ you were so *fast!* Fastest, smartest Runner we ever ‘ad. No-one could finish a run as quick and safe as you.”

Synjan merely watched, distracted by Kate’s scrabbling hands and not having anything especially uplifting to add. Yes, she’d been Ellis’ best Runner and he’d shaped her into his most steadfast employee, his irreplaceable second in command. But it wasn’t like she’d ever had a choice in the matter.

“You were so sweet, following Nick around like a lovesick pup and play-fighting with Ren,” she giggled, hugging herself and curling her bony shoulders inward, as if enamoured by the cuteness of the memory.

Synjan couldn’t let *that* remark slide. “I wasn’t playing. I fought Ren because he tried to rape me and because he beat the smile out of you,” she argued.

Kate flinched as if she’d been slapped, anger and hurt warring in her expression. “N-no, that’s not true. Ren *loved* me!”

“Ren was no-good scum that never deserved you,” Synjan countered quietly.

“He died for me!” Kate screeched, tears welling and her face contorted.

Synjan was at a loss, unable to argue such a tangled lie. Ren had been a mediocre assassin, trained as a sniper to do Ellis' bidding. He was an arrogant psychopath that had accosted every woman that came near him and he'd met his inevitable demise when he didn't scout his kill-spot well enough about eight years before. The Authorities finished him and Kate had spiralled.

"Forget about the past. We need to talk about your work here," Synjan said calmly, steering the conversation back to where it needed to go.

The sniffing continued before the brunette looked at her. Horror dawned. "Synjan...no! I can do better! I was just...havin' a bad day is all!" she gabbled, her fingers fretting against one another as she slid forward onto the edge of her seat to plead her case.

"I told you—"

"You said you'd gimme a chance!"

"This is the third time—"

"No! You can't fire me! I have nowhere else to go! I'll *die* if you kick me out!"

"We'll move you somewhere else, the farm outside the city has—"

"You can't send me away! Ren is buried here!" she pleaded, falling off her seat and onto her knees. The sharp report of bone hitting wood caused Synjan to wince. Kate grabbed for Synjan's hands, trying to press them together between her own in a gesture much like a prayer.

"Ren is dead, Kate. And you're going to be if you don't stop using."

"I can stop! I will stop - I *have* stopped! Today was my last day, I swear, just please don't send me away, Synjan, I'm begging you. This is all I have. I'll get clean, I'll do better. Please? For an old friend? Remember all those times I helped you when you were little? Huh? Remember how you could always come to Kate when you were crying and I'd look after you? Good old Kate, always there for you," she crooned, her words running together as she pawed at Synjan's face now, trying to stroke her hair, hands shaking

so hard she inadvertently pulled strands more than patted them.

Synjan couldn't bear it any more. The proximity was stifling and it hurt too much to watch someone she'd once cared for discard her remaining shreds of dignity in a useless attempt to protect herself. She had to put a stop to it.

"Enough!" Synjan yelled, restraining Kate's wrists without any difficulty. Looking Kate in the eye made her feel out of control and she squeezed her eyelids shut momentarily. This situation, this place, did it rob everyone of their power? The worst part of it all was how this travesty of a woman could have been her, had Ellis not intervened. She opened her eyes, equilibrium regained.

"I'm sorry, but you're no use to us as a housemother. You can't take care of yourself, let alone the runners or the money. You'll need to get your things and I'll have you taken somewhere nice where you can get the shit out of your system," she said succinctly.

Watery eyes blinked up at her and there was blessed silence while her words sank in. "You fucking *bitch!*" Kate screeched, now attempting to gouge Synjan's face. "You think you're so much better than me because you're Ellis' personal little favour giver, but you're just a whore like the rest of us!"

Synjan clenched her teeth, lips drawing back in a silent snarl, amazed at the venom behind the words. More vile accusations followed, more descriptions of the many ways Synjan was no better and owed her privileged position all to Kate – except she was too much of a two-faced bitch to look after the people who'd helped her. She was cold and dead inside and her heart was a stone. Synjan held Kate's hands throughout the tirade, sickened by every insult but unable to think of a way to stop it until Kate took it a step too far.

"You little bitch," she sneered, "you stuck-up Wanderer bitch with your special powers and—"

Synjan backhanded her hard enough that she smacked her head against the wooden floorboards with a dull thud. Kate lay there groaning while Synjan's mind raced. How could she have forgotten that Kate knew her secret? How had she not thought about the danger that posed before now? Sure, friends made promises to friends as children but all bets were off when one of those friends was turning the other out onto the street.

Realising she was standing over Kate with her fists clenched, Synjan understood how this needed to be resolved and a cold wave ran from her head to her toes. She couldn't return to Ellis with Kate's knowledge hanging over her and she was loathe to use her gun...but there was another weapon she hadn't considered until now. She was looking at it.

"Kate. You have to go."

She tried to convince herself that the pitiable creature huddled on the floor was just a shadow of the friend she'd once had and that her plan might even be a mercy. *Was* a mercy.

"But...tell you what I'll do," Synjan hinted. She was pleased when the crying stopped. Kate unfortunately had plenty of practice recovering after being hit and she likely sensed that a change in her favour was coming. "Ellis wanted me to take you out of the city," she lied, "but I gather you don't want to go, so I'll give you some money and you can find a place in Gredann that you're happy with, okay?"

"Where'd that be?" Kate scoffed.

Synjan frowned, realising the brunette had a point. The only place someone like Kate belonged was Dockside, and it wasn't known for its rental properties like the more esteemed parts of the city.

"The Ship Inn?" Synjan suggested, naming a hotel not far from the docks. It was mostly frequented by sailors who'd decided to put in to shore overnight. It wasn't a pristine establishment but there were always rooms available.

Kate wrinkled her nose. "It's not real big. Or clean," she said, like she wanted to be convinced otherwise.

"C'mere," Synjan encouraged, helping the brunette to her feet. She grasped her by the upper arms once she was standing and held eye contact. "It'd be for the best if you went there. I know it's not great, but it will give me a chance to organise a bigger severance pay for you. You can look for a proper house later. Ellis wants you out of here today and it'll keep him happy if I can tell him you're gone and you're safe, even if you only have a little room at first. You don't have that much stuff, do you?"

"Mm-well, no," Kate admitted, swiping at her running nose while she considered Synjan's proposal.

"Go pack your stuff. I'll ride it to the inn for you and see you settled before I go to the bank."

The reference to money had the desired effect as a greedy light entered Kate's eyes. "How much c'n you give me?" she queried.

"Plenty," Synjan assured her, tilting her head conspiratorially to continue speaking, even though it was just the two of them in the house. "I'll look after you, Kate. Like you always did for me. Ellis won't even have to know how much I give you, it'll be between you and me, okay?"

A muffled squeak of agreement preceded another unruly hug, which Synjan endured. After Kate finally let go, she went to the dining table to grab her junk before she hurried away to pack. Synjan returned the satchels to the office, pocketing a wad of cash from one of them before locking the door.

She was angry at Kate. *Kate* had failed and allowed this situation to degenerate. Synjan knew she should feel remorse about what she was orchestrating but it was difficult, thanks to Kate's groundwork. Should she lament a necessary solution? Weep? There didn't seem a point. She *did* feel sad, but she was also relieved. She didn't have the luxury of choice.

Kate was ready in half an hour – she even showered

and dressed in some decent clothing – and Synjan arranged her suitcase and box of belongings in the bike’s trailer. Kate walked beside her as she pedalled the awkward load through the hilly streets of Dockside, rambling about what a positive change this was going to be in her life. For a short while, she was like the Kate that lived in Synjan’s memory and it was harder to ignore the tight sensation in her chest.

When they reached the Ship Inn, Synjan laid down the deposit for Kate’s room, opting to pay for a week. Kate’s grin was triumphant, leaving Synjan regretful as she turned away to collect Kate’s belongings. Together, they carried everything up the rickety stairs. Inside her little room, Kate eagerly accepted the bundle of cash she was given, thanking Synjan profusely and promising she’d use the money for sensible purposes as she turned to squirrel it away beneath her clothes.

“I know you will,” Synjan told her sadly, summoning a smile as she gazed at her old friend’s gaunt back. “Good luck,” she bade and was barely acknowledged as she left the inn room.

Synjan rode back to the Bunker and took the satchels to the bank, checking on Kate with her Wanderer power. The distinctive strobing purple pattern that Synjan knew to be Kate’s left the Ship Inn. Kate visited her dealer and scored. She probably bought more than she’d been able to afford in the last five years. Kate then headed back to her inn room. Synjan returned the bike to the Office and walked slowly through the streets of Dockside. Waiting. Mourning.

The shadows were lengthening across the rooftops of Gredann when Synjan arrived back at the Ship Inn. The door to Kate’s room was unlocked and her body sat on her single bed, chin on her chest with her hands on her knees, palms up in a supplicating gesture. The spent needle was still in her arm.

“Oh, Kate,” Synjan sighed her eulogy as she crouched beside the bed. Synjan’s fight-roughened hands curled around Kate’s and she thought again of when this woman

had been young and vibrant and her friend. Tears rolled over her cheeks. She was sorry that Ellis had these drugs made, sorry that Kate had ever been sold to and infuriated by the way hard lives met even harder ends in Gredann.

Futility overwhelmed her and she hated herself for going through Kate's belongings, taking the leftover money and anything that could connect her to Ellis – including the drugs – before she turned and walked downstairs. She told the person behind the desk that they should call the Authorities to report the dead body upstairs. She nodded her assent when told she wouldn't get a refund on the money she'd paid for the room. It was expected.

As she headed for the Office, she wanted to run. Her instincts demanded action be taken to dampen the anger and despair swelling within. She didn't. Somehow, the tears continued to fall even though she wasn't actively crying. She swiped them away.

When she got home, Ellis was waiting for her, still sitting on the couch and reading a book. She went into the lounge this time and sat opposite him, knowing he wouldn't be satisfied if she didn't report in. He'd lit a fire and she stared into it as she waited for his opening remarks.

"You were gone a long time," he began, tenting his book upon his thigh. He made a show of looking at his watch. "It's almost six of the clock."

"Kate's dead," Synjan replied woodenly, sniffing.

Ellis tutted, adopting a sympathetic expression. "That's a shame."

Synjan glared at him. "Like you care."

"I know these things are hard on you," he responded mildly.

"Yeah. But *I* didn't do it. *You* did," she spat.

Ellis raised his eyebrows.

"You and your fucking drugs," she sneered, feeling the anger swirling again, too big to push down this time.

"Ah," he said, his eyes also beginning to glitter. He

stroked the book's spine as he offered an observation. "I didn't force them into her system."

"It was *your* money I gave her to buy them."

"Well, that was short sighted of you," he frowned.

"They were *your* drugs anyway. The money will come straight back to you!" she yelled, laughing bitterly as she got to her feet and emptied her pockets onto the coffee table between them. Cash and little packets of drugs bounced haphazardly onto the jigsaw puzzle, looking even more ghastly for the refined environment they'd appeared in. "It's just one big, twisted circle, going nowhere but down."

"You need to *calm* down," Ellis warned, his eyes narrowed. He looked furious about what she'd dumped on the table but he hadn't moved.

Synjan bit her tongue in a gesture of self-preservation, taking a breath before she spoke again. "I didn't want to kill her," she admitted, her voice cracking as the reality of Kate's death hit her anew. "But she remembered I was a Wanderer. And she was angry over being fired." Even to her own ears, she sounded infantile and helpless.

Surprisingly, Ellis responded to her vulnerability, his expression shifting to something soft and compassionate. "Then you did what needed to be done."

Synjan watched the fire, releasing her pent-up breath when Ellis eventually came to her, positioning himself around her. His hold was comforting, despite the rage she felt towards him, and she leaned into it instinctively.

"I didn't *want* her to die," she whispered plaintively.

"I know, Little One," he murmured, kissing her forehead tenderly.

"She used to be my friend."

"That was a long time ago."

"I let her down."

"*She* faltered. She failed," he crooned, his fingers lightly tracing her face and neck, leaving goosebumps in their wake.

"She just...got lost. It wasn't her fault."

He remained quiet, holding her. Their breathing was synchronised and she could feel the soft bump of his heartbeat against her cheek as she rested her head upon his chest. One of his hands slid down her back, kneading the curve of her lower spine.

“Maybe—”

“Don’t dwell. You did what needed to be done. You’re strong. Invincible. Be proud of yourself. I am.”

“I’m *not*,” she snarled, pushing violently away from him. “What is there to be proud of? I knew she’d do it, I did it on purpose, but that doesn’t make it *right*. I killed her!”

“As much as I did,” he supplied slowly, his eyes unreadable as the firelight reflected off his glasses.

Synjan was distraught, aware that she’d made him angry by severing their embrace but unable to bring herself to fix it. “That’s right! It was both of us,” she retorted, her voice hitching on an errant sob.

“In the end, everyone answers to somebody.”

Synjan flinched, hating that saying of his. She covered her face with her hands as she turned away from him and made her way to her room. He let her go.

Fighting with Ellis wasn’t the answer and if she stayed near him, she’d only get herself into some serious trouble. She needed to deal with her feelings another way.

CHAPTER THREE

Lords And Horse Thieves

THICK winter clouds hid the afternoon sun, shielding the blonde boy from what little warmth its rays could offer. The estate was too far south for snow but not far enough to escape the sharp bite of frost upon fingers, ears and nose. Hawke looked back at the manor and imagined he could see his brother Denis waving from one of the fourth floor windows, but it was likely just a glint of light. Denis wouldn't betray Hawke's location to their tutor, a harsh woman constantly infuriated by Hawke's behaviour. At least when he wasn't around, he could only disappoint her once. He didn't often escape his lessons but dancing was boring and he was itching to ride his new horse, Silverprint.

The light grey steed was a gift for his eighth birthday, a reward he'd known was coming and impatiently waited for. Each child of Donovan Court received their own horse on their eighth birthday. His sister Giselle had been the last before him and she'd been charged with a highly spirited mare. She'd named it Wilder, and such a name couldn't be more apt. Hawke wouldn't go near Wilder but would never admit he was scared. He'd seen the large bruise his eldest brother Umber earned for getting too close to the mare; chomped on the shoulder for his insolence. If Wilder hadn't treated his sister gently, the mare would've been sold.

He opened the stable door a crack, not wishing to alert the stablehands inside. They were often chatting to one another or puffing harshly as they worked but all he could hear was the soft movements of horses in their stalls. Hawke had spied Togar, the stable master, taking the wagon towards the township after lunchtime. Leaving so late meant he would be back just before nightfall. This left

Hawke a couple of hours of daylight to ride Silverprint through the fields, and have him back before the announcement for dinner. He knew his absence during today's lesson would be noted but he wouldn't suffer the consequences for it until the end of the week, when a report was given to his father.

He heard a murmur coming from the far stall that didn't sound like a horse. He wondered if one of the stable hands was getting drunk on burnwater. He was conflicted; should he go and have a look or continue his mission to saddle and ride Silverprint? If the drunken stable hand was Mako, it would be an easy way to get rid of him. The way the brutish fellow looked at his sister unnerved him. Hawke had warned Giselle about it and she'd scoffed at his concerns but she'd stopped visiting the stables alone.

Wilder whinnied at him from the stall beside Silverprint. He stared at his horse while trying to decide. Even though he knew what he wanted, he also felt obliged to protect his family and the horses. A drunk could do a lot of damage in a stable and Hawke was positive that the voice belonged to someone who'd found themselves a hiding spot.

He approached without caution. When he pushed open the far stall door and found six people crouched within it, he wasn't sure what he was seeing. A dark-skinned man sprang up and grabbed him, covering Hawke's mouth and pressing something pointy under his chin. It was then that Hawke realised that one of the people 'hiding' wasn't doing so at all.

Mako was propped against the back wall, the tines of a pitchfork deep in his belly. Fingertrails of blood stained his coveralls. He was most certainly dead. Seeing his body didn't bother Hawke as much as realising he had a blade against his throat. Fear held him rigid. The dark man holding him was very strong. The tip of the blade pierced his throat and he screeched in pain.

"What are you doing? He's just a little boy! Let him go,"

one of the crouching women hissed. Hawke looked at her with wide-eyes, grateful for her intervention and hoping his captor was under her influence.

“So he can run back to that big house and let them know we’re here?” he replied. “No way.”

Hawke made muffled promises, all of them lies.

“So tie him up, he’s no threat,” the woman suggested. Hawke didn’t want her help anymore. He stamped the heel of his boot against the boot-clad foot of his aggressor but all he won for his efforts was a shifted hold. Hawke didn’t try it again—there was something hard in the man’s boot that protected his toes. He realised he should’ve gone for an ankle or shin. Biting was also out of the question because the hand was pressed so hard against his mouth that he couldn’t move his jaw. He felt pinned and helpless and was reminded of the traps he and Denis set to capture wild animals foolish enough to investigate them—just like he’d been foolish enough to investigate the soft shuffling sound.

A hot stone lodged deep in his bladder, making him feel like peeing. He didn’t dare disgrace himself in such a way, despite the fear nestled in his chest. He was dropped and landed badly, his shoulder taking a lot of the force. He cried out in pain and was roughly flipped onto his back and then knelt upon by the dark man. His tormentor’s knee pressed firmly and painfully on Hawke’s middle, forcing the breath out of him. Hawke gripped the leg that was on him but even though he tried to dig his fingers in, all he could feel was tense muscle. The man might as well have been made out of rock.

“Don’t yell out, little boy,” he warned, “or I’ll fill you full of holes just like your boss there.”

Hawke was incensed that he would be considered a stableboy and also under Mako’s supervision. He looked towards the body and at Mako’s slumped form. From this direction the stablehand’s feet and legs looked like they belonged to a giant. Without their numbers, they wouldn’t have been able to overpower him. The other stablehand

was nowhere around either. Was his body lying in another stall?

The dark man moved off him and Hawke drew in deep, shuddering breaths. His chest ached and he rubbed where the knee had been planted on him. He didn't have long before his arms were grabbed and he was forced onto his stomach. When a rope was tied around his throat, Hawke cried a protest, tears of anger and humiliation streaking down his cheeks.

"Don't choke him, Eddie, by Junstill's sword."

Eddie grunted but continued to truss Hawke up so that his ankles were tied to his wrists and the rope around his neck connected to them both. If he wriggled, he would strangle himself. The rope Eddie used was for the horses so it wasn't coarse but it had been pulled tight. Hawke was left in the end stall with Mako's body while the group of five moved through the stables and took the horses. Now that he'd been left alone, a gamut of emotions coursed through him. Anger, indignation, frustration and hatred. His initial fear was well coated.

He heard a horse kicking and stamping, a great deal of whinnying and cursing and then an exasperated order: "Leave it." Hawke felt vindicated by Wilder's ill-tempered mannerisms and hoped the mare would give them a well-placed chomp on his behalf. His heart sank when he heard where Wilder's rebellion led. "Take the grey one next to it."

"No!" he shouted, dismayed. "No! No!"

His objections earned him a threat.

"Shut up, kid, or I'll kick your teeth out."

Hawke felt like crying. The choking, cloying sensation filled up his neck and sat there like a hot, sticky wad of glue. Swallowing didn't get rid of it and it was a useless emotion. Crying did nothing but mess up his thought process; he'd discovered that early on when some of his tutors pulled out their switches to keep his sharp tongue in check. He'd learned to pick his battles but he'd not allowed them to beat him down. Instead he opened his mouth to

take in a deep breath but not to call out. He kept taking long, deep breaths until the air melted away the emotional lump in his throat and he could think clearly.

He listened as they saddled the horses and could imagine his calm, trusting horse allowing them to do it. Beautiful Silverprint, whom Hawke had barely ridden himself, with his unusual light grey markings. They looked like someone had trailed silvered fingers down his neck and rump. He was the finest possession Hawke owned, including the weapons that were 'his' to train with—not really his because they'd belonged to his older brothers at one time. He had to wait until he was twelve before he could get his own sword. He'd had his eye on a *tayeta*, a lightweight, narrow, flat bladed sword, because he was the most proficient with it.

The rope wasn't slippery but it did feel slick because it was braided with waxed cord. Hawke worked his wrists around and around with determination, relying on the fact he wouldn't be checked on because the bastard was confident he'd done a good job tying Hawke up. The rope around his throat loosened and tightened with his movements. After a short while he could feel sweat dripping down his wrist from the exertion. He reconsidered; it was probably blood not sweat since his wrists were throbbing painfully. He had to hurry up, they sounded like they were getting up on the horses and once they were gone, any head-start meant the horses might be lost forever. Hawke had to release himself, escape out the back door and run to get help. The work-horses were in the back paddock but they were still rideable, and since Wilder was being left behind, there was a fast horse that would be able to trail them easily.

His plan clear in his mind, Hawke twisted and sawed until he could pull his hands free from the binding. He hadn't expected his legs to fail him as soon as they were freed and both feet smacked hard against the dirt floor. He froze, listening for the sound of footsteps but he could only hear the jingling of stirrups and conversation near the

main door.

His plan went awry as soon as he got to his feet and peeked around the stall opening. One of the thieves was opening the doors for Wilder and Speck, the two horses that weren't being ridden. Wilder was the kind of horse to bolt for freedom and so she did, galloping past the group and causing one of the other horses to rear up. Silverprint was unsettled but didn't do much more than snort his discontent. Hawke was furious to see Eddie—the dark-skinned leader of the group—saddled up on his stallion.

Hawke glanced down at his wrists – in the muted light of the barn he could see that they had angry bracelets of red, but had only rubbed raw to bleeding in one spot on his left wrist. He'd expected much worse. They were hurting a great deal but he squashed their importance down.

The man that had released Wilder and Speck pulled Speck out of the stall but the sullen steed was obstinate about remaining in the stable. Eddie grabbed a crop and whipped it hard upon Speck's flank. The ageing horse wasn't prepared for this kind of abuse so it had the desired effect of forcing him to gallop away.

"You bastard!" Hawke screamed, disgusted that this monster, this murdering, abusive monster, was riding his horse and mistreating the other animals. Five faces turned his way, including the one who hadn't saddled up yet. Hawke was torn between running towards them or running away, until Eddie began to ride Silverprint towards him at a trot. Hawke realised his mistake and turned to the other end of the stable, lifting up the wooden beam that kept the smaller door closed. It was still big enough for a horse and man to fit through (if the man ducked) and he realised with a sinking heart that he wasn't going to be fast enough anyway. The hairs on his nape prickled as he listened to nearing hooves. Panic made his hands slippery as he grabbed the bolt lock release. Before Hawke could open the door, he was picked up by the back of his collar. His clothes were finely made; they supported

his weight and didn't rip, and so he was indelicately thrown over Eddie's lap and ridden out of the barn along with the rest of the group of horse thieves.



They rode through the night. Hawke was eventually allowed to sit up in the saddle in front of Eddie, like he'd used to ride with his father as a small child. He asked questions that were ignored before finally holding his tongue. He paid attention to the towns they passed, looked at the stars and deduced they were bearing north to colder climates. He was hungry and his stomach and chest were aching, first from being knelt on and then from his abducted position on the saddle. One consolation was the lack of pain in his wrists, they'd gone numb. By the time the horses were allowed to slow to a walk, Hawke did what he hadn't wanted or expected he would do; he dozed.

They made camp. Someone carried him to a sleeping spot. He got the impression it was Eddie and something in him balked until a different sounding voice hushed him and he quietened. Through narrowed eyes he saw a pale man with brown hair. He hadn't been sleeping well while riding and his dreams muddled with reality; the smell of straw made him think it was Mako carrying him...then he got a whiff of leather and it was his father carrying him, his hold was tight but comforting...then it was Denis, who had somehow aged up. Hawke tucked himself into Denis' arms and welcomed real sleep.

He awoke with a strong urge to urinate, the pressure in his groin uncomfortable and aching. He was constricted in a strange kind of bedding that seemed to have no exit. There was no ceiling or sky because he was underneath a low-hanging beige fabric roof. He cried out as he fought the bedding, waking the blonde woman beside him. She knelt up and pressed her finger against her lips and then his.

Hawke's heart began to beat frantically as he recognised her from the horse thief group.

It hadn't been a dream.

"Don't make a noise, little boy," she told him. Hawke didn't much care for the title.

"I am Hawke Aron of Donovan Court," he declared importantly. He was hoping to inspire fear in her for capturing a nobleman's son, but she didn't react.

"Alright, Hawke Aron, my name's Carmen. I promise I won't hurt you."

"Just like you didn't hurt Mako?" he asked acidly.

She was surprised. He liked that he'd surprised her because he felt like it gave him an advantage somehow. He didn't want to betray his fear to her, she would perceive him as weak and think him worthless enough to slit his throat. As he watched, her surprise melted until she was looking at him sadly. Was it pity in her eyes?

"I'm sorry about your friend," she began.

"He wasn't my friend."

He'd surprised her again, he saw.

"Do you need the toilet?" she asked eventually. The reminder that he had to go made the desire more urgent.

"Yes, please." He understood that he needed her help to escape the strange bedding. She reached over and unstitched it with a single whirring noise. Hawke noticed small metal teeth and as soon as he was out he realised how cold it was. Inside the strange cocoon he'd been comfortably warm.

He heard the sound of trickling water and songbirds. Their twitters told him it was daytime. Carmen got to her feet, awkwardly bent over because the roof was very low. When Hawke stood, the top of his head brushed the roof of the small material room. He saw another sleeping woman nearby, using a book as a pillow. She looked younger than the rest of the group.

"That's my sister, Lyssa."

"I have a sister, too," Hawke said. Carmen smiled and

nodded before reaching past him. She unstitched the fabric room the same way as the cocoon bedding, by pulling on a metal fastening that whirred, opening a flap for Hawke to step through.

There were no thoughts of escape as he stepped outside, just a pressing need for relief. He moved some distance away from the other fabric houses the horse thieves had and found some privacy behind a few scrubby bushes. After urinating he found he felt better and could think more clearly. He looked around to assess the area.

It was unrecognisable. He'd never come so far north before but had always wanted to. His father had taken Umber into the far north on an ice-serpent hunt but all they'd brought back with them were bear skins. Denis insisted serpents were extinct because nobody had slain any in their lifetime or even their father's. Hawke wasn't convinced. Their grandfather had disappeared on a serpent hunt along with his group of six men, and what else could overwhelm a team of seven skilled hunters if not an ice-serpent itself?

There was a high dirt bank on his left that he didn't think he could scramble up. It looked smooth and glossy like it was frosted over. If he tried he imagined he might slip and then would be caught before getting far. The running water was a creek bed not too far away and there were small areas at the edges where it had iced over. Hawke could see the horses nearby but they'd all been hobbled so they couldn't wander too far. He didn't have the time to approach, undo the hobble, hop on and then ride away. The three male horse thieves were gathered around a pit where they were making fire. Hawke watched as they manipulated a piece of flint that held the flame for them instead of casting sparks.

They must've come from a faraway place, to have such unusual equipment, but they sounded the same as he did when they spoke. His family held large banquets in the great hall several times a year, and nobility travelled from all over to attend. He'd been paraded before them and had

to dance with all the girls that he might one day court, tying in families and political interests. He'd listened to many of them speaking, with strange pronunciations of their vowels and sometimes even using words he wasn't familiar with when they discussed their homes. The horse thieves didn't have accents like theirs, they sounded local.

None of them were looking at him. Carmen had returned to the fabric house where her sister continued to sleep and the men were all fire-building. Hawke's focus was on Eddie, the dark-skinned man, who was speaking to the other two.

Hawke crouched, shielding himself from their vision and considering his escape. He knew his directions with the sun and the stars so he could head south by day and night. Travelling would be hard though, for his breath steamed the air and his fingers and nose felt pinched by cold. He'd worn his riding boots so his feet were warm, but he hadn't dressed for a long trek north. His pants were unsuitable for hard travel, his under tunic with half-sleeves was of a thin weave and his winter tunic over it had no sleeve at all.

"What? Where is he?"

Hawke peered through the scrubby bush and watched as Eddie stood and whirled around, stumbling on the uneven ground. Hawke hoped he'd fall but he didn't. Eddie hurried to the fabric house. He looked upset.

"Did you let him go?" Eddie yelled into the door flap of the fabric house. There was a protest inside and then Carmen's voice. Hawke couldn't make out what she was saying because she wasn't yelling back.

Hawke wondered why Eddie thought he was gone when he hadn't even looked around for him; he'd just leapt to his feet and started yelling. He was joined by one of the other men.

"I don't see him. I don't see him," the man near Eddie said. Eddie moved away from the fabric house and started to turn in a slow circle. Hawke held his breath and

remained still. If he moved, they would see him...but they saw him anyway. Eddie looked right at him and pointed.

Every instinct was screaming in Hawke to run but he didn't. He stood up and fidgeted with the hooks and loops on his pants, as though he'd recently pulled them up. Then he approached as Eddie marched towards him.

"What?" Hawke announced sullenly, playing dumb. His eyes widened and he flinched away but Eddie's hand was faster and he was struck across the face. He was unable to keep his footing and unbalanced. On the ground he caught himself with his hands and saved himself from being winded. "Bastard!" Hawke yelled. Eddie's boot pressed against his nape, forcing his face into the pebbled earth. It was unyielding and gritty.

"Stop it!" Carmen screamed. The boot disappeared and Hawke scrambled to his feet. Carmen must've shoved Eddie because of the way they stood. "He's just a little boy. What's *wrong* with you?"

Hawke raised a hand to his cheek. It felt both hot and cold, he couldn't identify which. Either way it was stinging and he shuffled closer to Carmen.

"He was trying to run away," Eddie said and looked to the man nearby, who was staring at Hawke with confusion.

"He wanted some privacy for toileting, you fool. Would you rather he do it inside the tent?"

Tent. The word sounded unusual and harsh amongst the rest of the words. It wasn't something that was a part of their language, he was sure. Which strange thing was the *tent*? Was it the fabric house or the peculiar bedding he'd woken up inside of?

"I still can't see him," the first horse thief said. Hawke stared at him and wondered who was the greater fool, because the man was looking directly at him. The lanky man who'd stayed by the fire finally joined them.

"You're right," Carmen said. "I'm getting nothing."

Hawke wished he truly was invisible.

"He has the blood," Eddie said, grabbing Hawke's wrist in a tight hold. Hawke immediately jerked back to try and

pull out of his hold.

“Don’t *enhance* it! What if he’s an Elementalist?” Carmen cried out. Eddie let go and she had to catch Hawke who’d been arching away.

“He’s not an Elementalist,” one of the other men said. “Not if both of you can’t see him.”

“What power is that?” Eddie demanded, speaking to Carmen who stood behind Hawke. He was interested in the conversation in spite of himself. He didn’t understand what was going on, but by context he understood they thought he had some kind of special ability. If the fact he was a nobleman’s son wouldn’t have them fearing the consequences of taking him, then perhaps this ability they were discussing would.

“It’s pretty obvious,” the other man pointed out.

“Yes, it is.” Carmen squeezed Hawke’s shoulder in a way that was possibly meant to be comforting to him, but he found it restrictive. The three men were all looking at him with renewed interest, like they’d found themselves a new prize.

“What’s going on?” yawned a second female voice from behind Hawke. Carmen’s sister Lyssa hadn’t been so interested in the goings-on during camp, but she wanted a catch-up regardless.

“We’ve got ourselves a Shielder.”

Available Now

AXIOM

WANDERER OF WORLDS

BOOK ONE

BUY THE BOOK AT AMAZON

Synjan Walker is a Navigator, her vision expanding well beyond the natural human scope. Raised by a man she owes everything to, she finds it difficult to escape her obligations.

Daeson of Cloverlea sees the truth when people lie. Unfortunately, it can't protect him from secrets and it doesn't stop him from being deceived and manipulated.

Hawke Aron of Donovan Court considers himself important but when he reveals a power others covet, he craves anonymity.

The Authorities have discovered hundreds of worlds. Beneath a veil of good intentions, they seek absolute control; every government, every continent, every resource. To them, the Wanderers that defy their rules are parasites that threaten their dominance...and must be exterminated.

Find out more at deliastrange.com

On Release: December 2015

UNTETHERED
WANDERER OF WORLDS

BOOK TWO

Find out more at deliastrange.com