

## Chapter 1

*The old man thought there was some irony in the fact that the captain, Brander, was the grandson of Lena's father, Sir Brenit. Brander's father used to be in the Navy, and Opal was his home port. Brander took command of a ship, just as his father, but by way of a different route. He started his career as a merchant marine and then took various officer positions for merchants plying the sea between Denion's southern coast and the Falias. Now he owned his own ship. The old man had kept tabs on Lena's family but the last time he saw Brander he was still young and smooth faced. Now, standing there on the deck watching his passengers board across the gangplank and the cargo lined up on the docks in wagons, he looked like Brenit himself. The old man led the way, setting his foot on the deck first, and Hefft shepherd the boy behind him.*

Lena was dead. Xadik was dead. Patience was dead. The first two made me sad ... like a weight on my chest that made it hard to breathe. And the last, Patience falling to crossbow bolts, made me angry ... so very angry. How much more did I have to endure before the tech would let me die?

I was in a slough of sewage and run-off on the west side of the city, hunting rabbits. Whitefield— to the east its white marble walls gleamed like a snowbank, reflecting the setting sun. I should have been cold, deep winter was coming to Denion, and my torn boots and clothes were soaking wet, but the tech was doing something to me. Sometimes I felt hot, like I wanted to take my clothes off, no matter the cold.

Target 50 feet and closing ... IMPERATIVE: assault target ... assault target ...

The tech had caught movement out of the corner of my eye and targeted the offending animal. *It's a rabbit*, I screamed in my head. Out loud I said, "You don't *assault* rabbits. You hunt them."

The water here was ankle deep, but the old pine straw and mud under the water was a little deeper. I turned full face toward my quarry. As quiet as I could I pulled one foot free, finding a more solid perch on a rock just below

the surface of the water. It was too much for him, he bolted, and in an instance my field of vision narrowed and I ran after him. Twenty feet at foot speed and I was out of breath and stumbled to a stop as the rabbit disappeared in the underbrush. The highlighted frame and target my tech was projecting disappeared with it.

My chest felt like fire and I fell to my knees in the muck. A pale outline of my body appeared in my eye, flashing red in several places ... places the tech hadn't been able to repair just yet. Now the warning flashed again, I needed to eat.

Package ITO11291995k46 SOLDIER.MODEL3v183c67 requesting tactical link, authorize?

*Ahh, the ghost, again.*

It happened a couple of day ago. I was sure it was a ghost so I hid ... burying myself in the mud and muck so it couldn't find me. Today, however, I realize it's something wrong with the tech. It was messed up. It was trying to fix me ... and my head had been hit hard. The tech was confused.

"Patrin?"

How could I get the rabbit? The tech absolutely insisted that I had to kill a rabbit.

"Dear He Who is Most Holy ... I've searched for days, trying to use my link to find you."

I got up, my legs shaking with exhaustion, and something grabbed me. I turned to look at it.

"It's me," a hooded figure said. The thing's clothes were muddy and in the same shape as mine. It let me go and pulled its hood back ... the face was scarred, burned. One eye was cloudy, and its hair ... there were just patches of it. The rest of its head was pink skin and stubble.

"It's me," it said again. "Xadik."

Ghosts will leave you alone if you ignore them. I hit the NO on the link request and turned to walk away.

"Wait!"

It grabbed me again and I bared my teeth and swung around— I would have fallen if it had not held on to me.

"What are you doing? Patrin it's me ..."

"I know it's not you, you're dead," I told it. "Stabbed fourteen times ... three went straight through your chest and came out your back."

That got its attention. It let go of me and leaned back a little. I could tell it was surprised I knew the truth. Its one good eye stared at me.

My tech was flashing:

Package ITO11291995k46 SOLDIER.MODEL3v183c67 allied  
unit. Designated *non-hostile* ...

Non-hostile? Now I knew something was wrong with the tech. Anyone that had been on the other side of Xadik's sword would disagree.

"I'm not dead," It said. "I think something's wrong with you Patrin ... we need to go. Asaul and the Sentinels are looking for us. They figured out, just like I did, that the sewers were the only way you could have escaped the guards at the gate ... they were searching every drain between the first and second walls."

When I didn't say anything it said, "We have to go *now*, before they start searching outside the walls."

It reached for me again and I tried to jerk back, but my muscles and reflexes were not what they were just eight point five days ago. It latched on to my arm and started dragging me through the slough. I reached for my knife, an old habit, but it was gone. Lost when I fell from Patience as we crossed the

gate ... guards shooting her with crossbows. They should die for that. *They should all die.*

\* \* \*

I passed out, somewhere in the slough ... I guess. That was normal for the last week, I was fortunate that I didn't fall face first in a mud hole and drown. When I woke it was warm, not the warmth of the tech doing its tricks, but warm on my skin, like a fire. The smell of smoke followed by a pop and crackle confirmed it. I could hear Xadik moving around, my tech could sense his bodily presence this close. At some point I realized it was him, not a ghost. He had somehow survived Asaul and his men, but I chose to lie there with my eyes closed and just listen and think.

What was I supposed to do now?

"I know you're awake."

Maybe that was my problem, I never really thought things through ... never really thought about tomorrow.

"I'm not a ghost." There was some more rustling around, and then I heard him pouring something. Tea, I thought.

"I know," I said and opened my eyes, staring at the side of a rough-cut wall that reminded me of the inside of Gil's shack.

If I had been thinking— I mean *really* thinking about it— I never would have gotten involved with Lena.

"Do you think if I hadn't been involved with Lena ... she wouldn't have died?" I asked.

I heard the slight click of a cup as he set it down on a wood surface. Then more noise as he sat down and got comfortable.

"I think the people of Brenit would have suffered more if we hadn't been there ..."

"I mean, do you think Baler tracked me ... tracked her and ..."

"And Lena would still be dead, along with Sir Brenit."

There was a finality to his voice. After a moment of silence I heard him sipping. I sat up and looked at a small table sitting on short legs, about lap high. A steaming cup of dark liquid was on my side. Xadik was on the other, drinking from his cup. The fire was in an old iron stove against the back of the shack ... a pipe ran up the wall and through the roof. So like Gil's shack.

Xadik nodded to the cup and said, "It's tea."

"What about Patience?" I asked.

"What?"

"Would Patience have died, if she hadn't tried to get me out of the city? I wouldn't have been in the city."

He sighed and looked at me, his one good eyebrow was knitted up in concern.

"Patrin ... I think you're having some sort of ... breakdown. Link, so I can take a look."

"Trauma feelings," I corrected him.

"What?"

"Trauma feelings, that's what it's called."

He stared at me, with his one eye. "Galín has been trying to reach you."

"I know, I've been deleting his messages."

"Patrin, the mission has changed. We need to get to Lordingport, to meet Garret."

"Garret? I'm ... I'm not going anywhere."

"Patrin!" He yelled, then started coughing. After he cleared his throat he continued, "Galin doesn't blame you for what happened. He knows that Halin and the opposition somehow found out that we were there ..."

"I woke up in a sewer, Xadik!" I was getting angry, what more could Galin want from me? "I had three crossbow bolts in me! It took two days of crawling through crap to find a drainage pipe in the wall! And now the tech is telling me to drink blood ... I'm hunting rabbits ... *to drink their blood!*" I almost died and those I cared for *did* die. What more could Galin possibly want from me, I screamed inside.

The short tirade left me out of breath.

"Yeah, well I woke up on fire. *On. Fire.*" He said calmly, but his tenor was growing the more he spoke. "Asaul's men carried me to a trash pile behind the palace barracks and tried to burn me. And my tech is telling me to eat *wood!*" His wrecked face turned even more twisted. He said it again for emphasis. "*Wood.* Like twigs and roots and sassabrush stems."

He drank some more of his tea and took a deep breath and said, "We're messed up, Patrin. Galin has contacted me every hour of every day for the last week. He's sending Garret to Lordingport with medicine for us. I don't think our tech can ... fix all of this on its own."

I lay back down, turning away from him, and stared at the wall. I didn't want the tech to fix me. I wanted it to let me die.