

Bloodwoven

Sample

Draft Three: Written by G.J. Terral

Chapter One

Bonds of Hope

“Think you’ll make it?” Lin called back to the two riders behind him. He shifted and turned to look at them. Margaret, belly swollen as any he’d seen before, sucked in uneven breaths. There was no denying how ready she was to give birth, and by the way her grip tightened on Temmin’s hands around her waist; she’d been ready ages ago.

“At least... to Lyre,” Margaret replied sharply, accented by sharper breaths.

“You won’t make it to that backwater, bad as you sound,” Temmin said.

Lin eyed the man. There were many reasons to bring a child into the world, and not a single one of them applied when you were a soldier for the Ferrucium.

“And... how many babes... have you carried?” She grunted, and Temmin braced behind her.

Temmin chose not to reply, and the three of them were better for it.

“See anything?” Temmin called.

Thick trees pressed along the dirt road, roots breaking at random intervals. But in the distance, far enough to take more time than Lin thought they had, shone the smallest prick of light.

“Lantern light ahead. Maybe.”

“You’re the one with the bloody *sight*. Are they lanterns or not?” Temmin snapped.

They both knew that’s not what having the Sight meant.

A bird call broke the stillness of the surrounding forest, and a breeze rustled leaves. A second gust threatened to billow Lin’s cloak behind him, so he wrapped the thick red fabric tighter around himself.

Lin sniffed the air. There was a cloyingly sweet scent carried on the wind. Like overripened fruit sitting in the sun for too long. But all he saw was the squat stone wall in the distance, no more than knee-high on foot.

“Still surprised they didn’t send you with a partner,” Temmin said, their shared mount siding up alongside Lin’s.

Margaret breathed in and out as she leaned forward in the saddle and clutched the horn. Temmin kept his arms around her but judging by the way he shook his hands, she had squeezed too hard one time too many. Since the pair wore matching red cloaks, it was hard to tell where one person started, and the other ended.

“Spread thin as things are,” Lin shrugged. “But, I’m all the support you’ll need. Take my word.” That same scent lingered, but the light in the distance had clarified into two points. “Lanterns,” Lin jerked his chin to the end of the road.

“Thank the Six,” Margaret groaned.

Lin scrunched his nose as they crossed the outskirts of the village. Lyre was a town of small homes, all bearing single lanterns. And it looked like so many other small boring places he’d been to. He looked along the thatched roofs, straining his vision to the dark portions of the village, where light met shadow and blurred.

“Physiker?” Temmin shouted as if looking for a man who owed him coins. He dismounted in a blur of red cloth, assisting his partner down as quickly as he could.

“We need a physicker, *please*,” Lin said, just as loud but far less demanding.

A wrinkled-face grey beard approached from a building pressed to the back of the village, a small goat following. He looked unclean, unkempt, and generally not the sort of person you’d want tending to your ailments. Especially as the stench outpaced him.

By the Six, let it not be this man. Lin approached him, staring flatly at the man’s thick fingers and flat nose. “Are you the physiker here?”

“That’d be Pyter Collier. Home cross the way—” the man waved, but Lin had already turned from him and rushed to Temmin and Margaret’s side. His ass and legs ached, hard as they’d been riding, but he did his best not to show it.

“This home, come on.” Lin was taller than Temmin by a head and a bit stronger, far as he could tell, so he stooped and let Margaret lean on him as much as she needed.

“Back here. Bring her back here,” a man called. He stood at the back of the building and spoke as he slid a tawny apron over his head. “Wounded?”

“With child,” Temmin replied. “I’ve got her. Handle the horses.”

Lin let Temmin take the rest of Margaret’s weight. She smiled and nodded, whispering little thank yous at Lin. Sweat covered her brow, matting her hair and making her shine in the light of the lanterns.

Temmin didn’t so much as look back at him. Lin rubbed the bridge of his nose and shook his head. They should’ve stopped at the last town, but Margaret had insisted on getting to Lyre. Assumedly to be closer to the Ferrucium once the babe was born. But it all seemed so reckless to Lin.

Pacing around the horses was the man that had directed him to the physiker. Whether he was examining the saddlebags or horses themselves wasn’t obvious, but he kept far enough away so as not to be bitten as the mounts stomped. “Second visitor in so many days. I imagine the children are beside themselves.”

Lin nodded and went to his saddlebags, pulling feed for Nebra, his horse, and then some for the couple's horse.

“Ehm. Apologies. Realized I didn’t give myself a proper introduction. I’m the Alderman of Lyre. Alderman Pryor.”

When Lin turned, the man wore a self-proud grin and extended his hand. Lin pursed his lips and shook the man’s hand. “Lindel, of the Ferrucium.”

Every small village had a person who thought too highly of themselves, and more often than not, it was an Alderman. About as important to the way of things as the stablehand at the end of the day.

“Oh, no doubt. Knew by the look of you, you lot were with them. But I can say I didn’t expect three... usually just a single pair comes through.” Alderman Pryor touched the chain around his neck, a sigil of his station and one meaning nothing on the roads and less to Lin.

Lin nodded and returned to the horses, loosening the first saddle strap before realizing he needed to find a stable. He didn’t need to explain to the man why there were three of them instead of two. The more people who knew women couldn’t Bind when pregnant, the more brazen would-be attackers might act.

“Ehem,” Alderman Pryor cleared his throat, something seeming to be a habit of the man.

Lin turned and stared at the man. More accurately, he stared flatly at the flat of the man’s nose. Abnormally flat, really, all things told. He’d have to add it to his list of things to tell Denro. Not that speaking of a person’s unusual features was smiled upon by the Six, but it was how they spent their time together. When villages all seem to appear as wood-made copies of the other, and all the Binders of the Ferrucium dress and act the same, you had to find joy in the differences of other things. And Denro would be beside himself with all the ways Lin planned to describe Alderman Pryor’s nose. It was like someone had stolen the meat of it, leaving behind sad cartilage and sadder nostrils, as deflated as they were. As if someone had, against their better judgment, stolen the piece of his nose that allowed him to smell himself or that, as a child, he had been caught snagging one too many pies and paid the iron price of a pan across his face.

“You aren’t... aren’t here to take any of the children. Are you?” the man asked, brows knitting together. To the man’s credit, his voice didn’t waver, and his chin was held high when he asked. The question was enough to pull Lin from his thoughts and let the smile that snuck its way onto his face slip away just as quick.

“Are there any here that need to be evaluated?” Lin asked.

“Children, you mean?” Alderman Pryor said as if forgetting he had brought it up.

“Yes.”

“Here?” the squat man asked with a shake of his head.

Lin sighed. “Where else would they be in relation to your question?”

“Fair point,” the man replied, hand trembling as he touched his chain of office again. “No. No one here to be evaluated. Least of all children. Though I think Denpy here might have a knack for smelling the witchcraft you lot do.”

Lin frowned. He’d make a note. Lyre needed an evaluator. Denro might be happy to do it if the timing lined up right, but—

Nebra stomped, ears flicking before falling flat.

Lin turned and opened his eyes as wide as they could go. The roofs were empty, and all around, the trees shifted with a wind that promised winter’s arrival.

Alderman Pryor spoke. Something about the damned goat. Dery, Den? Lin frowned as the creature wailed. He spun in a half-circle and then noticed the flash of light. So swift, so subtle. Like the thinnest thread ever seen had caught the sun just the right way and danced with its warmth. But it was night.

“Get inside and take that One-loved goat.”

If the man took offense to Lin’s language, the draw of Lin’s blade dissuaded him from pressing his point. He hurried away, looking back after Lin more than he needed to, tugging the rotund goat from the lead around its neck.

Lin shot a glance toward the medicinary.

The world exploded into strands of sun-kissed golden threads. Only visible to Lin through the Binding Sight he’d been lucky enough to be born with. Lucky in the sense that he could see his potential death arcing towards him, taut and beautiful.

Lin rushed forward and extended his left arm fully in front of him, sword pointed down. Using his pommel as a focus, he pushed his will into the world like a thread through a needle’s eye. And at the same time, pushed forward with his other hand, his own Binding arcing into the one cast toward him.

They crashed together into orange-gold sparks. Lin searched for the source, keeping his arm extended and pivoting on the balls of his feet. The horses had moved further from him, and he was thankful for that. He didn’t need Temmin and Margaret to survive the birthing and then come out to find Lin had failed to keep their horse alive.

Another flicker of light. Another forcing of his will into the world. Each Binding took a toll, and there was a chance that was exactly what this assailant meant to do. Wear Lin down.

Lin scanned the homes. Not a single inquisitive child or overbearing mother graced the doorways. It was too late into the night. Too close to winter. Too many horrible things had happened over the last year, and it wouldn’t surprise him to learn even a place like Lyre had heard of the sort of awful things befalling some of the most remote villages.

He couldn't very well yell *come out*, or he'd have more than the untethered out and about. So instead, he watched, hoping the Six were blessing all his senses and not just his Sight.

Another flash of light glowing with that same warm, ethereal light of Bindings arched towards him. *Unimaginative.*

Lin didn't send his own back in reply. Instead, he danced around the Binding, racing toward the home it had come from. Wind dried his eyes, but blinking might mean missing a Binding flying for his throat. So dry as they might be, he willed his eyes to remain painfully alert.

There. He saw it.

Covered head to toe in Bindings which were blurred only barely by tattered strings of cloth, was an *untethered*.

Wild eyes, with Bindings laced through the colored portion, locked onto his.

Lin slowed his breaths and did his best to steady his hands. It hadn't been guaranteed one of these One-loved abominations might attack, but that was why he was here escorting the pair. Never could be sure what would or wouldn't happen out on the road.

Twin Bindings laced towards him with a light flick from the untethered's glowing wrists. Part of what made the untethered so dangerous was the way they Binded without the need for a focus. That and the infliction of madness which drove them to attack people like a feral wolf who had been cornered.

A wail tore its way from the medicinary causing Lin to look over his shoulder at the building. Another, softer one followed it. And the sounds of a scuffle through an otherwise silent evening.

Another one? Lin's stomach sank. Then his right shoulder was warm and wet and screaming in pain. He shifted, leaning to the side and ducking under the second of the twin Bindings that hadn't stopped slicing toward him just because he'd looked away.

I'm one half of a whole fool.

Lin rolled his right shoulder, pushing the pain aside.

The untethered danced across the field. Gangly limbs, all bearing intricate twisting lines of glowing light just under the surface, like veins of golden light, clawed at the earth. It was on Lin in an instant.

The brightness of its Binding-stitched flesh forced Lin to squint, but he straightened his blade and sliced at the creature. It snarled and, with each clawing strike, sent out another Binding.

Lin stabbed forward, but the untethered caught the blade in its Binding covered hands. Like a beautiful shining mold, the Bindings spread from its palms and across the flat of the blade.

Once something was bound to another, moving it was impossible until the Binding broke. So Lin released his grip on his hilt and focused his will, using his empty hand as a focus and threading his

intention into the world. A Binding formed and pushed the blade forward. An effort to give the creature a steel-touched embrace.

Lin knew better than to expect a creature so entwined with Bindings to let a simple trick be its end, so he rushed forward and drew the short dagger at his hip.

With a push of his hand and a second, sloppier Binding launched at the untethered's legs.

It growled, low and thrummy like its insides were hollow. The blade in its hands bent, flexing, then sprung down with a spin and stabbed into the earth. The Bindings along its surface glowed for a moment, then faded.

With the barest twitch of its legs, it jumped over the low, slicing Binding Lin had sent.

Lin blinked, sweat stinging his eyes. His cloak weighed heavy, and he couldn't help but look back to the medicinary.

The untethered landed in front of him in a blur of gray mottled skin and bright, twisting patterns, and Lin lunged at it. Swordplay hadn't worked. The unnatural, One-whispered thing outclassed him in Binding. So that left running or scrapping, and Lin had always been a scrapper.

Bindings cut his way, but Lin ignored them and got his arms around the creature and squeezed.

Holding onto the thing sent a reverberating hum through Lin's chest like the untethered was a wire strung too tight and the wind itself strummed it.

It kicked and pulled itself back, but Lin planted his feet. The untethered was quick and fluid, and the amount of sweat on its skin made it hard to keep hold of, but letting goes meant dying. And dying meant those two he was sent to escort would do the same. That the same would happen to the child being birthed.

Lin squeezed and pressed the dagger into the untethered's side.

The untethered spoke in nonsense. Its words were as knotted and as unintelligible as the lines of arcane light carved against its flesh.

Sharp pain from the already wounded shoulder spiked as the thing sunk rotten teeth through his fabric. The cloak stopped the worst of it, but the pressure was enough to bring spots to Lin's vision.

He squeezed tighter. It bit harder. The world spun, and then they were on the ground, Lin on top but struggling to remain there.

Lin moved his head away from the untethered's mouth and then headbutted the thing. Once, twice, three times. It didn't stop the world from spinning, but the nonsense words twisting from its tongue did.

His sword rested in the grass too far to reach, and the dagger was lodged in the things back. As close as they were, the untethered's breath was hot and rancid, and between that and the headbutts, Lin was verging on passing out.

But he couldn't. Using the creature's neck as a focus, Lin threaded the needle of his will into the world once more and created a Binding so thin he was like to cut himself, making it, as much as the untethered once it connected.

The Binding sunk in slowly. Breath by breath. For a moment, it looked like the untethered's flesh resisted it. Then the blood welled up, as rust-smelling as it was colored.

The untethered kicked, flailed, hissed, spat, and writhed against the sharp Binding, but with its hands pinned, all it was doing was letting the Binding bite deeper into its neck.

Lin slumped over. Heavy breaths puffed out as clouds in the cool air and mingled with the steam from the creature's blood.

"Six save us," Lin whispered. He looked around, but no other traces of untethered flickering away in the shadows. Some faces broke the darkness of homes. Children clutched tightly by parents. Partners holding each other.

To those without the Sight, it was obvious a fight was occurring, but they had no idea this... *thing* that looked so human was a monster driven by madness. Lin shifted his weight, rising unsteadily to his feet, and his shoulder throbbed, a not-so-deep but unignorable reminder he'd almost gotten the worse end of the dance.

They'd need to burn the corpse. Give the untethered a chance to plead its case to the Six above, but sure as Lin was a Binder, this thing's forgotten name was whispered by the One. *No doubt about that.*

Lin rolled the body to the side and pulled his dagger out, the blade already rusting. *Fuck.* He groaned and slid it into the leather at his waist. Then he found his blade, no worse for wear, as to be expected of finely smithed Ferrucium steel. He sheathed it with a sigh. Six knew his shoulder stung.

Limping to the medicinary was perhaps the one positive thing about these little villages. It wasn't far to limp. Unfortunately, the short distance meant Lin had less time to plan what insults he'd throw at Temmin.

The back door creaked open, and Lin shuffled into the lantern-lit hall. The left side of the home was quiet, but from the right, the soft sounds of sobbing carried.

Happy? Sad?

Female Binders had it leagues worse than males, and Ferrucium-born children had a higher chance of complications. It sounded like only one person was crying. *And it's not a child's wailing.* Lin held his shoulder and steeled himself for whatever rested past the doorway.

Shadows danced along the unadorned wall at the far end of the room. Cots lined the closest wall with cabinets resting overhead. Blood-soaked sheets were bundled at the foot of the nearest cot, draping onto the floor beside, and Temmin sat there weeping and whispering. He held Margaret, her face pale, eyes open and unfocused. Temmin rocked them, and the bundle clutched tight to his chest.

Lin sucked in a breath.

“Kill her. *Kill her.*” Temmin choked.

“What?” Lin whispered.

The physiker was nowhere to be seen, but at Temmin’s comment, Lin scanned the rest of the room.

“Her!” Temmin stared across the room, jutting his jaw and clutching Margaret’s arm.

Lin stumbled further into the room and fumbled to pull his dagger from his belt. On the floor, tied like cattle to be carried and slaughtered, was a woman.

Her hair was pitch black, her skin white with streaks of blood along her forearms and face. With her hands tied by Bindings as they were, she couldn’t weave her Bindings, and with her mouth Bound shut, she couldn’t plead. So she wept and made guttural pleas.

“I... I was attacked by an untethered outside.” Lin said, looking back at Temmin.

“She pretended to be wounded and attacked us. Killed Margaret and the child.” Temmin pulled Margaret close and breathed in through his nose. Stifled sobs shook him.

“She doesn’t look untethered.” Lin looked down at the rusted dagger in his hand and then at the woman who couldn’t even plead her own innocence. “Where is the physiker?”

“Did the monster knock the sense from you? I’m telling you, *she* attacked *us*! Kill her, please and let me mourn!”

“I... I need to understand first. Where is—”

Temmin rose, leaving Margaret and an unmoving bundle pressed against the wall. She shifted, but it was her body weight sliding her to lay on her side. Temmin shouldered past. A dagger flashed into his hand.

“You had one task. To *safely* escort us. My grandmother will be hearing of your *many* failings.”

Lin opened his mouth but failed to find words suiting the moment. *He had failed them.*