

## Chapter Two

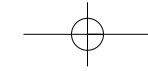
The aerostat field at Hundred Locks was slowly filling up with passengers awaiting the *Lady Hawkligh*t's arrival. Oliver checked his trouser pocket. The description of his uncle's guest still lay crumpled in there.

'Oliver.' A voice diverted his attention away from his uncle's errand – Thaddius. A boy he had known from school. When Oliver had still been allowed to attend school, of course.

In the way of the young everywhere, the lad's nickname was Slim, because he was anything but. The portly Thaddius had about as many friends in Hundred Locks as Oliver. At least, as many friends as Oliver had been left with, after the word had spread about what he really was . . . or might become.

'Tail spotting?' asked Oliver.

'Tail spotting,' confirmed Thaddius, his portly cheeks spreading in a grin. He showed Oliver his open book, neatly criss-crossed by a pencilled grid. 'See, I got the *Lady Darkmoor*'s tail code last week. She normally operates on the Medfolk-to-Calgness run, but the merchant fleet are introducing the new Guardian Cunningham class in the south, so some of the uplander airships are being reallocated here now.'



*Stephen Hunt*

Oliver nodded out of politeness. Thaddius was desperate to join the Royal Aerostatical Navy but his family had too little money to purchase him a commission, and just a little too much to countenance him ever signing up as a humble jack cloudie. Poor fat Thaddius was going to follow the family trade and become a butcher with his father and brothers, spending his evenings at the field, wistfully watching the graceful airship hulls sailing in and out. Dreaming of what might have been. And soon too. There were only three months to go before Thaddius and his classmates left the gates of the local state school for the last time.

‘Fieldsmen to the line,’ cried one of the green-uniformed airship officers and a burly gang of navvies took position, making a cigar-shaped outline on the grass. A pair of large dray horses walked to the nose of the formation to stand alongside the field’s tractor-like steamman; ready to provide the heavy muscle. The steamman hardly looked up to the job. His name was Rustpivot, and he had been a worker at the field when Oliver’s Uncle Titus was a boy. As large as two wagons, his boiler belly was bordered by six spiked wheels. Despite his advanced years, the steamman could still reach out with any of his four arms to tow an aerostat back into lift position.

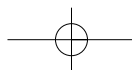
‘Those with passage booked, please make sure you have your tickets to hand,’ called an official.

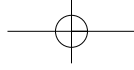
Oliver sighed. Travel.

Thaddius looked at him and read his mind. ‘They can’t keep you registered forever, Oliver. They’ve either got to pass you, or, well, you know. . .’ his voice trailed off.

‘They’re never going to pass me,’ Oliver spat. ‘They enjoy keeping me prisoner here too much.’

Thaddius fell quiet. The woes of his approaching family apprenticeship were put into perspective for him, set against





### *The Court of the Air*

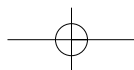
the alternative prospects faced by his companion on the airship field. Remaining an outcast. Marked out. Gossiped about. Unable to travel further than was allowed by the state's requirement that he sign on every week. Thaddius gave him a long look of sympathy, then left for the airship hangar to join the gang of tail spotters waiting by the doors.

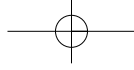
From the south the wheezing heave and fall of a quartet of expansion engines hushed the noise of the waiting crowd. The airship rose out of the forest behind the field, the top half of her hull painted merchantman green, the bottom half a bright checkerboard of yellow and black squares.

The *Lady Hawklight* dipped her nose and sailors threw open hatches along the side of the gondola, casting down lines weighted with lead heads towards the ground. The fieldsmen caught these and the airship's massive envelope was dragged towards the docking tower, the aerostat's nose pulled with a loud hollow clank into her capture ring. Now she was fixed, the lines from the aerostat were wound into pulleys and the airship was drawn down to her hover-side position ten feet above the field.

The docking tower sat on a single iron rail. If the airship's plan of flight included a berth for the night, both tower and ship would eventually be drawn back into the hangar at the far end of the field where Thaddius and the other children eagerly waited. Disembarkation stairs were pushed up to the gondola doors and wagons carrying ballast water and precious cylinders of celgas drew up on her starboard side.

The usual pool of passengers with business in Hundred Locks began to disembark. Half the travellers were foreigners from outside the Kingdom of Jackals, the white togas from the city-states of the Catosian League clashing with the brightly multi-coloured ponchos of the Holy Kikkosico Empire. Neither country allowed Jackelian airships to overfly their lands, suspicious of





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the Kingdom's monopoly on air travel and the opportunities for reconnaissance it provided. The foreigners would travel by canal navigation to the head of Toby Fall Rise, and from there return home by schooner and ferry across the Sepia Sea.

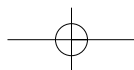
There were archaeologists in the group too, from one of the eight great universities, easily conspicuous by the leather cases they carried, filled with fine tools that they would not want to risk to the movements and shifts of the cargo hold. They were still arguing over whether the colossal dike that overshadowed the town was a natural freak of nature or some feat of an ancient civilisation.

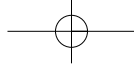
Oliver put his hands into his pockets for warmth, and finding the note, suddenly remembered the reason for his visit to the aerostat field. His uncle's guest!

Most of the arrivals had already dispersed. The queue of passengers boarding the *Lady Hawklight* thinned to a few late arrivals. Out on the field the local boys had set up a game of four-poles, the amateur fast-bowling watched with amused detachment by the officers from the aerostat as they waited for the airship to take on her full load of celgas and ballast water.

A peddler was hawking to the remaining passengers from the Holy Kikkosico Empire, a smoke-filled glass bottle hanging on his chest, offering six breaths of mumblesmoke for a ha'penny. The ranks of barouche-and-fours had emptied too, the small horse-drawn coaches taking any willing travellers through the small crowded town and up to the Hundred Locks canal navigation from which the settlement took its name.

Among the stragglers stood one man who fitted the crumpled description Oliver's uncle had dashed out that morning from his desk. He was thin, a touch under Oliver's height of six foot, and also possessed a shock of dark blond hair cut short and ragged. What the description had omitted were the





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dark iron glasses that rested across the bridge of his nose. Cheap milled fare, they had never graced the exclusive shelves of any optician back in the capital.

Oliver was well used to guiding visitors from the field and across to his uncle's home at Seventy Star Hall, but they were normally well-to-do merchants like Titus Brooks himself. His warehouse in Shipman Town swelled with barrels of empire wine, city-state contraptions and – it was rumoured – brandy still smuggled through Quatérshift, a trade legal for hundreds of years but now forbidden in both Quatérshift and Jackals since the end of the Two-Year War.

The man Oliver was staring at looked more like the cheaply dressed clerk of a parish council. Oliver walked over to him. 'Mister Stave?'

'Harry,' said the man, extending his hand to Oliver. 'Harry Stave. The last time I was called mister anything was—' he looked at Oliver and thought better of the tale '—well, a long time ago, let's say. Just call me Harry.'

'My uncle is expecting you, Harry.' Oliver pointed towards the town.

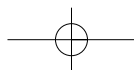
'I don't doubt he is, old stick. But my luggage, such as it is, is still coming off the *Lady Hawkligh*t.'

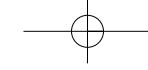
A cushion of hemp netting was assembled underneath the gondola's cargo hatch, set up to take the royal mail sacks, scarlet with their KoJ seal, a lion resting underneath the portcullis of the House of Guardians. A steamman was pulling a trolley away from the airship's shadow, piled high with crates, packages and travel chests.

'You're not exactly travelling light.'

'Just the one,' said Harry, lifting off a battered ivory-handled travel box. 'And there we are.'

Each of the visitor's words was carefully nuanced, as if Harry were polishing each vowel before saying it. They belied





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the otherwise rough appearance of the man. Oliver offered to take the case, but Harry shook his head. 'You work for Titus?'

'He's my uncle. I suppose I do.'

'Ah, well then.' Harry stopped to look at Oliver as they left the field. 'Young Master Brooks. Perhaps I should have recognized you. Although there's not much about the babe that I see in the man.'

That made Oliver start. 'You knew my parents?'

'That I did, Oliver. My trade sometimes put me in the path of your father and mother. You were nearly sick on me once, as a swaddling. Do you remember either of them?'

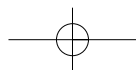
'No. Not at all.' Oliver could not keep the pain out of his voice. 'My uncle. He doesn't talk about them.'

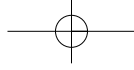
'It's as hard to lose a brother as a father, old stick,' said Harry, gently. Seeing the effect the conversation was having on Oliver, he stopped. 'Let's not talk of it either, then. We'll allow those who have moved along the Circle to rest in their new lives.'

Oliver wondered if his uncle's visitor knew he was registered. Probably. If he had known his parents, he would have heard the stories of what had happened to them. And to Oliver. If it bothered Harry, he did not show it.

They were in town now. Seventy Star Hall lay beyond Hundred Locks proper, nestled at the foot of the hills that led up to the Toby Fall Rise. A dog tied to a post outside the fish market was barking as dockers down from Shipman Town arrived to find evening lodgings at the inns and drinking houses, their heavy steel-capped boots clattering against the cobblestones.

The talk of his parents had lowered Oliver's mood. So this was to be the map of his life, then. Allowed no proper trade or apprenticeship. Signing onto the county registration book





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once a week. Shunned by most of the townspeople. Running small errands for his uncle to keep him busy and out from under his relative's feet. Unable to leave the parish boundaries without being declared rogue and hunted down. Denied those simple freedoms that even the fox in the burrow or the swallow in the tree took for granted. An object of pity, perhaps; charity, on his uncle's part; aversion from those who were once his friends and fellows.

With those bleak reflections they reached Seventy Star Hall to be met on the doorstep by the maid of all works, Damson Griggs. She took in Harry Stave – his battered travel case and cheap clothes – and wrinkled her nose in disapproval, as if Oliver were a cat returning with a dead mouse for her pantry.

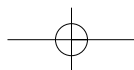
Damson Griggs was a fierce old bird, and whether it was the prospect of working with the damson, or being in the same house as a registered boy such as Oliver, she was now the only full-time member of housekeeping staff at Seventy Star Hall. Any other house of similar size in Hundred Locks would have at least five or six staff keeping the place. But Titus Brooks was something of a lonely, anti-social figure, so perhaps it suited him to keep the arrangement that way. Damson Griggs regarded the town's superstitious fear of Oliver as stuff and nonsense. She had known the boy since a pup, and if there was an ounce of feymist in him, it had not manifested itself in front of her these last eleven years.

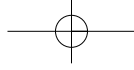
Oliver might have been of the same opinion himself, but then he had never told his uncle or their housekeeper about his cold, dark dreams.

'What wicked wind has blown you to our doorstep, Harold Stave?' asked the damson.

'Harry, please, Damson Griggs,' said their visitor.

'Well then, I suppose I had better be about locking up the master's brandy cabinet if you are to be staying with us. Unless





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you have finished with your dirty boozing and lusting across the length and breadth of Jackals – and a good many other nations besides, I don't wonder.'

'Now who's been impugning my reputation in such a manner?' asked Harry, scratching at his blond mop of hair. 'There's not a drop of the old falling-down water passed my lips these two weeks, Damson Griggs.'

'Your manners were too coarse for the navy to keep you.' Damson Griggs wagged a sausage-sized finger at the man. 'And they'll keep you no better under this roof either.'

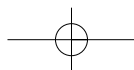
Despite her admonishments, she opened the door wider for Harry to enter, taking his thin summer travel cloak and hanging it on one of the bullhorn-shaped hooks in the hallway. Wide and white-tiled, the hallway was still filled with bright clean light. By late afternoon the sun would be behind Toby Fall Rise and the north end of Hundred Locks would live up to its name – Shadowside – as the shade from the dike fell across their house. Then the damson would bustle around, lighting the oil lamps filled with fatty blood from the massive slip-sharps netted in the Sepia Sea and slaughtered above them in Shipman Town.

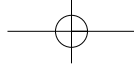
'Thank you kindly, damson,' said Harry. He winked at Oliver.

A noise came from upstairs. Titus Brooks was still in his study, an onion-shaped dome in which the previous occupant – a retired naval officer – had installed a telescope. Now only the brass mountings remained in the centre of the room, the telescope itself having been removed when he died and sold off by his sons and daughters.

Damson Griggs disappeared with the guest, coming back down the staircase alone. 'You pay heed to my words, Oliver Brooks. Stay away from that man. He's a bad sort.'

'Is he a sailor, Damson Griggs?' Oliver asked.





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‘The only airship he flies in is the *Lady Trouble*,’ spat the housekeeper.

‘He was a sailor, though? You said. . .’

‘You just mind what I have to say now, young Master Brooks. The only action that jack ever saw was the watering down of an honest sailor’s rum ration. Harry Stave used to work for the Navy Victualling Board before you were even born, buying in victuals, celgas and other supplies for the RAN. He knows your uncle from his contracts with the Board. But Mister Stave was discharged. Caught with his hand deep in the till, no doubt.’

‘And he works for Uncle Titus now?’

‘No, young master. He most certainly does not. He works for himself, just as much as he always did.’

‘So what trade does he keep that would bring him here?’

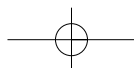
‘A good question indeed. And if you ask him direct I doubt you’ll get an honest answer. Some old toot about buying cheap and selling for a little more is as like what you would hear.’

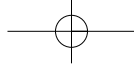
Oliver stared up the stairs towards his uncle’s study.

‘No, young Master Brooks, you had better give that man a wide berth. Your neck is too valuable to me to see it ending up dancing for the hangman’s crowds outside the walls of Bonegate. And if you keep company with that rascal for too long, you’ll be heading down the path of criminality, of that I am certain.’

There was no tweaking Damson Griggs’s nose when she took against someone, so Oliver just nodded in agreement. From where he was standing, the path of criminality had more to recommend it than an errand boy’s apprenticeship granted out of pity and familial kinship for a dead brother.

‘Out from under my feet now with your questions, young Master Brooks,’ commanded the damson. ‘Millwards delivered our pantry stock this morning and I have a pie to bake





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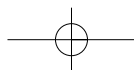
for supper. An extra large one, if that rascal upstairs with your uncle intends to stay the night.'

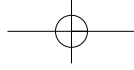
Returning to Seventy Star Hall from the crystalgrid operators' at twilight's last gleaming with a leather satchel full of Middlesteel punch-card messages for his uncle – prices from the financial houses of Gate Street and stock movements from the exchange at Sun Lane – Oliver was worn out from walking.

Damson Griggs had returned to her cottage in town, leaving his pie and cold boiled potatoes covered by a plate in the kitchen. From the two empty wineglasses, red with the dregs of a bottle of claret, Oliver guessed that his uncle and their guest had eaten already. He walked to the top of the staircase and saw that a light was still showing under the door of his uncle's study, the muffled sound of conversation inside.

Damson Griggs's words of warning came to his mind. Why was this interloper of uncertain provenance visiting his uncle? Was Uncle Titus stooping to involve himself in some scheme of a dubious nature? Oliver was not a financier from some fancy address in the capital's Sun Gate district, but his uncle's business affairs seemed sound enough from his limited vantage point.

Oliver crept back down to the ground floor and lifted a key from under the stairs, then quietly unlocked the door to the drawing room. Inside, the fireplace's flue ran upwards through to the study, opening into a grill above, the only source of warmth for the study during the cold winter nights at Hundred Locks. As Oliver had discovered, where heat carries upward, the sounds of conversation echo downward. Oliver placed his ear to the opening. Outside, the first evening stars were appearing. Before midnight, all seventy stars the grey limestone house was named after would be visible. His





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uncle and his guest's voices were not raised and Oliver had to strain to catch snippets of the conversation.

'Trouble – counting on a commo plan – compromised—'  
His uncle.

'If it is – think they – hostile service – learn—' The disreputable Stave.

'This time – up to – in the black—'

Oliver leant forward as much as he dared. There was a familiar tapping. His uncle clearing his mumbleweed pipe on the side of his desk.

'Will they be coming—' Harry Stave.

'Our friends in the east?' Uncle Titus.

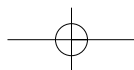
The East? Oliver's eyes widened. The Holy Empire of Kikkosico lay northeast. And directly east lay Quatérshift – but no friends there. Not since the Two-Year War.

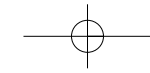
In defeat, the Commonshare of Quatérshift had completely sealed its land border, hexing up a cursewall between the two nations; to deter any of her own compatriots who developed a yearning to leave Quatérshift's revolution-racked land, as well as putting off military incursions by the Jackelians. There was no official trade with the shifties, although smugglers still landed cargoes of brandy along the coast, where moonrakers could evade the attentions of officers from the customs house. Like all the children in Hundred Locks, Oliver had been severely warned never to stray into the hinterlands east of the town, where only the shadows of patrolling aerostats and the odd garrison of redcoats and border foot lay dotted across the wind-blighted moors.

'A dirty game—' Harry Stave.

'Already – in the wind—' Uncle Titus. There was a rasp as a chair was pulled back. 'Two of my people dead—'

Dead! Oliver caught his breath. What foul business had Harry Stave involved his uncle in? Was their warehouse in





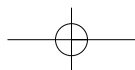
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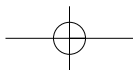
Shipman Town concealing casks of untaxed brandy? Had officers from the customs house been murdered on some small rocky harbour in the mountains above?

A sudden realization struck Oliver. His uncle had never revealed the full extent of his business dealings to him. Oliver ran errands and gleaned what he could, learning piecemeal from the occasional tale of which factor could be trusted to deal fairly, which clipper captain might be tempted to skim a cargo. Only his uncle was at the centre – none of his staff. Even Oliver could see the interests of those in the warehouse never stretched – or were allowed to stretch – further than Shipman Town’s wharves. Was this more than a cautious nature? Or did the left hand’s ignorance of the right hand’s dealings stem from the need to keep Uncle Titus from dangling on the wrong end of a hangman’s rope outside Bonegate gaol?

There was more scraping of chairs from upstairs and Oliver silently slid the drawing room door shut, then climbed into his bed on the ground floor. Damson Griggs had the measure of Harry Stave, it seemed. But just how deep did his uncle’s involvement go? Oliver felt the sting of shame as his immediate reaction to the thought of his uncle being thrown into prison was not concern for his sole surviving relative, but worry for his *own* fate. His uncle had already risked exile from what passed for polite society at Hundred Locks for keeping a registered boy under his roof, but no, the unworthy Oliver Brooks was more concerned about what might happen to his own neck.

If Uncle Titus were incarcerated, he would be left with no chance of employment at Hundred Locks, no future save the cold unwelcoming gates of the local Poor Board. He shivered at the thought. The county of Lightshire’s poor and down on their luck had enough problems of their own; a registered boy being thrown into their midst might be the final straw. How





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much easier to arrange a small accident at night? A pillow slipped over his face and the unwelcome interloper smothered out of the poorhouse inhabitants' lives.

His grey future, ensnared between the invisible walls of his prison-in-exile at Hundred Locks, was growing smaller and smaller as he drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

