

The Founder's Sigil

Book One of the Elendor Series

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To my granddad, who first led me into stories.

And to those who are surviving, struggling, or simply holding on —
may these pages remind you that you're not alone.



Chapter One

The End of Ordinary

Jonas dragged his feet across the supermarket floor, the soles of his trainers squeaking faintly against the tiles. The floor had been polished by the night crew but still bore the dull greyness of overuse, like the shine had long since given up. Above him, fluorescent lights hummed, bathing everything in pale brightness that flattened colour and made the rows of products look cheap and artificial.

The smell of cleaning chemicals clung to the air. It mixed unpleasantly with the faint odour of old bread from the bakery section and the metallic tang that lingered around the refrigerator units. Jonas tugged at his collar, feeling sweat bead despite the coolness of the store. His shirt pulled tight around his middle, the fabric creasing where it had to stretch, the supermarket's logo distorted by the curve of his stomach.

He hated the uniform, but he hated the way he looked in it more. The glasses perched on his nose slid down whenever he bent to adjust stock, and each time

he pushed them back, he was reminded of the thick frames, the smudge of fingerprints, the way they marked him as awkward, unathletic, forgettable.

He adjusted the badge pinned crookedly to his chest. Supervisor. The word might as well have been a joke. A title given out of necessity, not respect. Some of the younger staff listened when he barked instructions, but most ignored him until he repeated himself, their smirks barely hidden. He heard his name whispered sometimes in hushed laughter. He tried to let it slide. Tried to tell himself they didn't mean anything by it. But the sting was there all the same, a raw edge in his chest.

Two of his colleagues leaned against a till as he passed, laughing about something on a phone screen. Jonas forced a smile, the sort that didn't touch his eyes. Their voices hushed as he walked by, then broke again into stifled giggles once his back was turned. He didn't need to hear the words to know he was the punchline.

It was always like that. Always had been.

Stock counts. Shift schedules. Long days marked by the shrill beep of scanners, the clatter of baskets, the endless shuffle of customers who looked through him rather than at him. His life was this: filling gaps, making sure shelves were straight, signing forms, covering sick calls, trudging home to a microwave meal.

And never—never—anything more.

When staff invited him out—"Hey, Jonas, we're heading to the pub, you in?"—he had a list of excuses ready. He would say his mum needed him, or that he was covering the early shift, or that he had paperwork to catch up on. They accepted it with nods, but he could feel their relief. They hadn't asked because they wanted him there. They'd asked because not asking would have been worse. A courtesy, a box ticked, an obligation.

And so he always went home alone.

He had never kissed a girl. Never even come close. Not for lack of wanting. God, he wanted it—wanted someone to look at him and see more than the belly that bulged against his shirt, more than the awkward man fumbling with

clipboards. But he knew what he was. Knew what he looked like. That truth gnawed at him at night when the flat was silent, when the glow of the television lit the empty chair across from him.

Sometimes he let himself imagine otherwise. That in another life he'd asked out the girl from college who used to smile at him, or that he'd gone to university and found a circle of friends, or that he'd been born with a body that didn't betray him with every glance in the mirror. But those dreams were dangerous. They hurt too much. They reminded him how far from that life he really was.

And he couldn't leave this one. Not with his mum needing him. Her nerve disease ate at her strength, and the prescriptions piled up like bricks. Rent. Bills. Food. Heating. Every pound he earned was already spent before it hit his account. His job might have been suffocating, but without it, she would suffer. And Jonas couldn't carry that weight—the guilt would crush him faster than the monotony of the store ever could.

So he stayed.

Night after night, he closed up, locked tills, checked stock sheets. And night after night, he stepped out into the same car park under the same failing lights, dragging himself toward the same battered car.

Tonight was no different.

He shut the staff door behind him, and the supermarket's hum vanished, replaced by the damp chill of evening. The air smelled faintly of frying oil from the takeaway across the road. Sodium lamps buzzed overhead, their glow spilling tired orange puddles of light across the cracked tarmac. His old hatchback crouched under one lamp like a beaten dog, one headlight fogged, paint flaking in patches.

Jonas shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and started across the lot. His footsteps echoed faintly in the stillness. The supermarket sign above flickered, one letter stuttering as if fighting not to go dark. Jonas caught himself staring and almost laughed.

"That's me," he muttered under his breath. "Flickering. About to go out."

The chill of the night seeped into his jacket as he crossed the car park. His shoes slapped against the damp tarmac, echoing faintly between the rows of empty spaces. A fine drizzle hung in the air, beading on his glasses until the orange haze of the lamps blurred into halos. He wiped them with the corner of his sleeve, only smearing the view, and sighed. Even the rain felt like an insult—subtle and persistent, just enough to dampen his mood further.

He shoved his hands deeper into his pockets, fingers curling into fists inside the fabric. The lot was nearly empty, just a few straggling vehicles belonging to the night crew. His hatchback sat beneath the furthest lamp, as if mocking him with the distance. Every step stretched the silence, forcing him to listen to the scuff of his own feet and the churn of his thoughts.

This is it, isn't it? This is all I get.
Work. Sleep. Feed Mum. Repeat.

His stomach clenched, not from hunger but from the familiar self-disgust that rose whenever he caught sight of his reflection in a window. Tonight he'd glimpsed himself in the freezer door—glasses slipping, cheeks round, chin tucked into his collar—and the sight had followed him into the dark like a shadow he couldn't shake.

He imagined the faces of his colleagues again, the way their laughter always seemed to follow just after he passed. The memory burned. Were they laughing at a joke, or at him? He never asked. He couldn't risk hearing the answer.

He thought of the invites to pubs, to after-work drinks. He thought of how easily he waved them off, too cowardly to risk the humiliation of sitting at a table where he didn't belong. He couldn't stand being reminded of what he was not.

The night air pressed heavy around him. Damp and faintly metallic, like old coins. He told himself to walk faster, to get in the car, to go home. But his thoughts weighed more than his steps.

It was absurd—a flicker that made him want to laugh and spit at himself in the same breath. More? With what? With his swollen body and tired eyes? With his dead-end job and the flat where silence rang louder than the television? His

mum needed him, his money vanished every month, and his body betrayed him at every glance.

Still, the thought lingered—fragile, dangerous. What if?

For a fleeting heartbeat, a memory surfaced: his mum on a rare good day, telling him he deserved better. Then the darkness swallowed it again.

He shook his head. No. This was good enough—an uncomfortable life where he would do the same thing over and over again. Maybe someday he would run his own store, have a wife and kids, lose this weight, finish his life with those he loved around him. Fantasy. It could never happen.

Jonas lowered his gaze and shoved onward. The drizzle thickened into a mist, swallowing the edges of the lot. His car loomed just ahead, dented and familiar. Relief brushed him for a heartbeat—

—until movement flickered near the shadows between the lampposts.

He froze.

Two figures detached themselves from the darkness. Young men, hoods pulled up, shoulders hunched with an easy sort of menace. Their voices carried faintly—low laughter, sharp and careless. Jonas’s stomach turned to ice. He shifted his path instinctively, angling toward his car faster.

But then one of the voices called out.

“Oi. You got a smoke?”

Jonas kept walking, kept his eyes fixed on the car. His throat felt tight. He didn’t smoke. He wanted to say as much, but the words snagged in his chest.

Footsteps quickened behind him.

“Hey, mate. I asked you something.”

The tone sharpened. Jonas’s pulse spiked. He reached his hatchback, fumbling for the keys in his pocket. His fingers slipped, cold and clumsy against the

metal. He pulled them free, but before he could slot one into the lock, a hand clamped onto his shoulder.

Jonas stiffened. The grip was firm, not friendly. He turned slowly, his glasses catching the glow of the lamp overhead.

The two men loomed closer now. One wiry, grin stretched too wide; the other broader, jaw set, eyes hard. They smelled of sweat and stale smoke.

Jonas's mouth went dry. His heart hammered, but his voice was a whisper.

"I don't have one."

The wiry man laughed—sharp, ugly. "Doesn't look like you've got much of anything, do you?"

The broader one leaned in, eyes narrowing at Jonas's badge still pinned to his chest. Supervisor. The corner of his mouth twitched into a smirk.

"Boss man, eh? Big man in there. Out here though..."

He shoved Jonas sharply, enough to rock him back against the car.

"Not so big."

Jonas's keys slipped from his grip, clattering against the tarmac.

The sound echoed—too loud in the empty car park.

Jonas's back pressed against the cold metal of his hatchback, the chill moving through him like a sieve. His thin jacket strained to keep any heat in. His keys lay on the ground, glinting under the lamplight like useless scraps. The wiry man grinned wider, and the broader one folded his arms, casual menace in the gesture.

Jonas's heart thudded, each beat a drum in his ears. He wanted to vanish, to melt into the tarmac, to rewind the last five minutes and be safe inside his car. But the men were here—their breath sharp with tobacco and cheap lager, their eyes alight with the thrill of cornering prey.

“Look at him,” the wiry one said, jabbing a finger at Jonas’s stomach. “Bet he eats all the leftovers at work, eh? That’s why you’re the boss, isn’t it? Too fat to bend down for the low shelves.”

The laugh that followed cut deep—sharper than any blade. Jonas felt the words sink into his chest, finding the raw places already torn open by years of self-loathing. He wanted to say something, anything, but there was only silence.

The broader man leaned in, close enough that Jonas caught the sourness of his breath. “You think that badge means anything out here?”

He flicked Jonas’s Supervisor tag with one finger.

The plastic clicked against the pin like a hammer on a nail.

“In there, maybe you boss people around. Out here? I’m the boss.”

Jonas flinched, the truth of it digging harder than the shove that followed. His back struck the car with a metallic thunk. Heat flushed through him—shame, anger, fear—all tangled until he could barely breathe.

“Please,” he managed, the word cracking in his throat. “I just want to go home.”

The wiry one crouched, plucking Jonas’s keys from the ground and twirling them. “Home, he says. What’s waiting for you there, eh? Microwave dinners? Sweets? Pathetic.”

He tossed the keys to his friend, who pocketed them with a smirk.

Jonas’s chest tightened. His mum’s face flashed in his mind—tired, pale, bundled under a blanket. She needed him. She needed those prescriptions, the bills paid, the heating kept on. And here he was, pinned by two strangers who didn’t care whether he ever made it back.

Something twisted inside him. Fear still ruled his limbs, but beneath it burned a thin, fragile thread of defiance.

“I said give them back,” he heard himself whisper. His voice barely audible—but the men caught it.

The wiry one straightened, mock-surprise widening his eyes.

“What was that? Little boss man wants to play tough?”

He shoved Jonas's chest. Jonas stumbled sideways, shoulder striking the car door.

"Stop," Jonas said—louder this time. His fists clenched at his sides, trembling. He didn't know if it was anger or terror fueling him. Maybe both.

The broader man laughed, a sound without warmth. "Or what? You'll write us up? Dock our pay?"

He stepped closer, crowding Jonas, his shadow swallowing him under the lamplight.

Jonas's breath came fast, shallow. He thought of every insult, every laugh, every moment he'd walked away instead of fighting back. All the weight he carried—on his body, in his chest, in his silence—pressed down until it felt like his ribs would crack.

And then, for the first time in years, he pushed back.

He shoved the broader man—hands slamming into hard muscle.

The man staggered a step, more surprised than hurt.

The wiry one barked a laugh.

"Oh, he's got some fire after all!"

Jonas's pulse roared. His glasses slipped down his nose, but he didn't push them up. His fists clenched, ready for the backlash he knew was coming.

It came fast.

The broader man lunged, fist arcing. Jonas barely ducked—the blow grazing his ear. Pain flared—sharp and electric. He lashed out clumsily, fist connecting with the wiry one's shoulder. The man yelped, then grinned wider—the grin of a predator who enjoys the chase.

"Big mistake, fat boy."

A fist crashed into Jonas's gut, folding him. Air whooshed out of him, and he stumbled, gasping. His knees buckled, but he stayed upright, gripping the edge

of the car for balance. His vision swam. His glasses slipped, nearly falling, but he clung on.

Another blow landed on his back.

A knee drove into his thigh.

Pain scattered through him—each strike a reminder of how weak he was, how heavy, how untrained.

But something inside him refused to crumple.

Not tonight.

Not when his mum needed him.

He remembered her face that morning—pale and forgetful, asking about her meds. The thought of her waiting made his gaze flick to the back seat, where a small bag of groceries sat behind the car door.

“Stop it!”

His voice tore through the night, louder than he meant.

His fists lashed out again, clumsy, desperate, but fueled by something raw. He struck the wiry man across the jaw, snapping his head sideways.

For a heartbeat—silence.

The man wiped his mouth, touched the smear of blood on his lip, and the grin vanished.

“You’re done.”

Jonas froze. The words cut colder than the air.

The wiry man reached into his pocket.

Metal glinted as a knife slid free, the metal catching the lamplight.

Jonas’s breath hitched.

The world narrowed to that sliver of silver.

The broader man pinned him against the car, forearm crushing his chest. Jonas's arms flailed, panic overtaking any thought of defiance. He kicked out, boots scraping uselessly against the tarmac.

The wiry man stepped closer—knife poised, eyes alight with something feral.

Jonas's mind screamed: Not like this.

The wiry man's grin stretched, knife twirling lazily in his fingers. Jonas's pulse thundered, his body straining under the weight pinning him. Every nerve screamed for escape, but his limbs felt heavy, sluggish. The cold metal at his back was unyielding.

"You should've stayed quiet," the wiry one sing-songed. "Now you get to bleed for us."

Jonas's throat tightened. His breath rasped in short, shallow bursts. He thought of his mum again—waiting at home, asking softly if he'd brought her tablets. He thought of the aisles, the fluorescent hum, the endless shelves that had been his life. The absurdity of dying here—over refusing to cower—burned inside him.

"Don't," Jonas croaked, voice breaking.

The wiry man stepped closer. Jonas struggled, slamming an elbow into the broader man's ribs. The man grunted but tightened his hold, crushing Jonas's chest. His lungs burned. His vision swam. The knife inched closer.

And then—it sank in.

White-hot agony tore through his side as the blade punctured his flesh. The shock stole his voice, a gasp escaping instead of a scream. The world tilted. Sound muffled. Vision tunneled into a haze of lamplight and shadows.

Jonas's knees buckled, his body dragging him down as the blade ripped free. He slumped forward, arms useless. Warmth spilled down his side, soaking his shirt, sticking fabric to skin. The pain was immense—almost surreal, like a dream that overstayed its welcome.

The broader man let go. Jonas crumpled to the ground. The tarmac was cold beneath his cheek. His glasses slipped from his face, skittering away. He blinked, vision blurring, the lamplight splitting into stars.

“Pathetic,” one of them muttered.

Footsteps retreated. Laughter trailed.
Their voices grew faint—then vanished.

Jonas lay still, the world dimming around him.
He tried to move, to press a hand to the wound, but his arm refused to obey.
His thoughts scattered—fragments tumbling through the haze: his mum’s laugh from years ago; cheap birthday cake; the smell of disinfectant and overripe fruit in the supermarket.

And beneath it all—the truth he’d never escaped:
He had never been kissed.
Never known what it felt like to be wanted.
Never believed he was enough.

Tears blurred his fading sight.
Is this it?

He tried calling for help, but his mouth was dry, his voice only a croak. A distant voice came and went. He thought he heard the sound of an ambulance—but he already felt the slip, the pull, the cold inevitable slow drift of himself leaving.

The world dissolved into black.
Pain ebbed.
Silence crushed in.
He drifted—untethered—as though the earth had finally let him go.

When he opened his eyes—if they still were eyes—he was no longer on the tarmac.

A vast void stretched around him, endless and black. His body felt insubstantial, as though carved from smoke. In the distance, a faint shimmer glowed, drawing him forward. Each step echoed, though there was no ground beneath him.

The shimmer grew, unfolding into a Gate—towering, impossibly tall, its frame etched with lines of pale light that pulsed like veins. Beyond it, there was nothing he could grasp—no shapes, no colours, only a blinding, shifting brightness that revealed nothing at all.

He wavered.

Fear coiled around him.

What if stepping through meant oblivion?

The silence pressed in. Behind him stretched only blackness. Ahead lay the Gate, humming with invitation.

Jonas lifted a trembling hand toward the light.

And he stepped forward, not knowing whether the next moment would be his salvation... or his end.