

# SOTCHEK

BOOK TWO OF THE WALKING GATES

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## CHAPTER 1

The bishop turned swiftly down a back alley, avoiding the common streets and major thoroughfares of southeastern Amberdeen. He knew it was dangerous to be out late in this quarter, without his protective guard. But he could defend himself—even against many. They had taught him as much. Those he was going to see. He walked briskly, taking strides of a much younger man, exuding confidence, a warning to those who might try to confront him. He pulled the cloak he'd taken from the cathedral closer, hiding his stately clothes and badge of office, the hood covering his face. It was well past midnight when he arrived at the monastery's ruins, its remnants overgrown by the encroaching vines and gnarled trees that had long since reclaimed the courtyard in which the building once stood. It hadn't changed much in the year since he'd last seen it, except to become more overrun. He understood why they liked this place. It reflected their countenance—grim and foreboding. Pushing his way through the tangled growth, he found their meeting place in the only remaining corner of the stone building. He looked around, half expecting to see them standing in the shadows. But nothing moved. Watching the light of the moon

illuminate the crumbled remnants of the once grand ceiling lying nearby, he waited.

A flash of green light lit up the courtyard. The bishop glanced about, wondering if anyone had noticed. Looking back, he saw two figures a dozen feet away, hunched over in dark coverings. Strands of long greasy hair hung down from within their cowls.

He stepped confidently into the moonlight, then pulled back his hood to reveal his white hair and clean-shaven chin, long and defined. “Why have you summoned me? Our business was concluded.”

“Our business is never concluded,” the woman to his left spat out. “Or have you forgotten our agreement?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

The other woman raised her arm and pointed a long bony finger at the man. She looked briefly at her sister, seemed to think about it for a moment, and then lowered her hand.

The bishop sighed. “What do you want?”

“A boy is coming,” the woman continued. “You need to find him.”

“Why should I care?”

“*Because*, he will expose you.”

“You failed to catch him once,” the second hissed. “Don’t let it happen again.”

“You know of him,” the sister on his left added. “He is a *Wielder*.”

The bishop’s eyes widened for a moment.

“We thought as much,” the witch chuckled malevolently. “He’ll be in your city in two days.”

“Don’t fail us,” the other warned, raising her finger again. There was another flash of light, and the Witch Sisters of Dahgmor were gone.

The bishop stood in the ruined courtyard for a moment, thinking, frustrated at them for speaking to him like a servant. He may have been a friar once, before they’d discovered him and taught him how to eliminate his opponents. But he was the bishop now, and that commanded respect. Even from them. He brushed the thought aside. There were more pressing matters to attend to. He knew this boy they spoke of and, more importantly, who he could become. The Wielders had been a constant thorn in his side, an opposition to his influence over the young king, the last obstacle to having full control of the Empire. He knew he couldn’t elude them much longer. They were getting close to discovering him. The one who chose this boy—for the boy himself was irrelevant—could change things, could tip the balance in their favor. Their connection was stronger than he’d expected, a mistake that had almost cost Zacharias his life. He needed to stop them. Furrowing his brow, the bishop rubbed his chin, thinking. Then he smiled an evil grin. He knew someone who could help.

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