

# Chapter 1:

It was midday on another cold autumn day. The roads were covered in layers of orange and brown leaves, and the inner-city dwellers were up and about. With an hour or so to spare, they scuttled around the streets like mice looking for a bite to eat. Not everyone is fortunate enough to love their job, but most enjoy good food and good company. Well, almost everyone. Dylan was a little different.

It's not that he doesn't like people. Dylan loves a good conversation as much as anyone else, but he can't stand his work-mates - and for a good reason. Madgwicks & Smaug is the most prominent law firm in the area. More than a thousand people send their resumes each quarter, and only the best of the best have even the slightest chance to be hired on the rare occasion a position becomes available. Dylan was one of those people.

But he started at the bottom and he's still there. In the legal field, the bottom is a 'junior associate' – which may as well be another word for 'bottom feeder'. It's nothing like the idea of being a lawyer that was instilled into the minds of enthusiastic and hopeful students. Not even close. It was more like basic administration and office-work duties. The only difference was it took place within a legal firm and there was room to climb.

If you worked hard enough and impressed the right people, there was a chance you could climb the hierarchy, or move on into a better position at a different firm. It wasn't a fun place to spend most of your life. Dylan found his co-workers to be shallow and competitive, although there was one who seemed to take an interest in anyone other than herself. Her name was Jane.

'Come on, Dylan,' said Jane. 'You can't keep ditching lunch forever. Besides, there's an awesome place not too far from here. You can come with me.'

Jane had long auburn hair, emerald eyes, and a wide smile. She was bubbly and attractive but was also a caring, kind and a genuine person. A pure white rose in a sea of thorns and pricks. The co-workers at Madgwicks & Smaug would chat and laugh with one another, but beyond the four walls, nobody wanted to maintain a friendship. Nobody except Jane.

Dylan pondered for a moment. They always used to hang out, but now he's developed a thing for her and that's complicated things. He overthinks and overanalyses everything and is constantly worried about making a bad impression. Instead, he often ends up making no impression at all – or so he thinks.

'Nah, I think I'm good,' said Dylan. 'I want to keep working today. Can't afford to fall behind.'

'Standard!' yelled Pete, the workmate sitting opposite Dylan. He was an enormous man with brown eyes, slicked black hair and a generic

face with an obnoxious smirk. It's no surprise he was an aspiring lawyer, although he probably could have been a wrestler too.

'You think you're better than everyone around here, Dildo. But I don't see a reason why.'

'I – I don't think I'm better than anyone, Pete,' stuttered Dylan. 'I just want to stay here and finish my work.'

'Whatever, loser!' scoffed Pete. He closed his laptop and placed it into his backpack.

'Come on, Dylan,' said Jane. 'That's what you've said every day for the past two weeks. We all need a break. I'll meet you outside.' She rustled his hair and headed for the door.

Dylan looked at the pile of paperwork on his desk. He started placing signatures at the bottom of each one. It was the same task he did the day before and the day before that. He didn't want to keep working, and lunch with Jane didn't seem like a bad idea after all.

Pete stood up, straightened his tie and tucked in his shirt. He sauntered towards the door but stopped in his tracks. There was something he needed to do before he left. He took a few pieces of paper from the bin, scrunched them into a ball, and threw it into the side of Dylan's head. It was a perfect hit.

Dylan was furious. It hit him right when he was in the middle of writing a fresh signature, and the ink smudged across the page. Nothing made Dylan angrier than a mistake – especially one that wasn't his fault. The downcast look that usually resided on his face turned into a

wide-eyed stare, and it was aimed towards Pete. In a fit of rage, Dylan stood up and knocked his paperwork across the room.

‘What the hell, asshole!’ yelled Dylan. He stepped towards Pete.

‘Oh, oh, you have a back-bone after-all,’ said Pete. ‘But what are you going to do about it, bitch.’ Pete stood tall, about a foot and a half taller to be exact. And not because Dylan was short. Pete was enormous. He clenched his boulder-like fist and launched it towards Dylan’s head. It caused him to flinch, but Pete stopped before he struck Dylan’s forehead. Suddenly, a voice yelled from the distance.

‘Schneider! Croswell!’ yelled the voice. ‘What the hell is going on, here?’ It was the boss, Mr Smaug, an intimidating man who became even more terrifying when he was mad or stressed - and right now, he was both of those things. Dylan and Pete froze immediately and turned towards him like soldiers saluting a sergeant. They broke out into a nervous sweat. Nobody could blame them.

Mr Smaug wore a navy suit, navy tie, and a white shirt. It probably cost more than Dylan and Pete had in their savings accounts combined. But behind Mr Smaug's suave appearance was a man with the ruthless aggression of Darth Vader and the cold leadership prowess of Hans Gruber. He had receding black hair, pearly-white teeth, and fierce scowl. Combined with his large stature and stoic appearance, he could be easily mistaken for a Klingon in Star Trek.

‘I – I – I was heading out for lunch, sir,’ said Pete. He was the one stuttering now. ‘And Dylan was mad that he fell behind on his work.’

Mr Smaug looked unimpressed. It was obvious he could see through the lies, but that didn't stop Pete from trying.

'He had a fit and threw his papers across the room,' said Pete. 'I told him to calm down and come to lunch, and he threatened me.' Pete wiped the sweat from his forehead. For a second, he thought there was a chance he was off the hook. He wasn't.

'Silence!' yelled Mr Smaug, slamming his fist into the nearby desk. His frown somehow became even more fierce. 'Do I look like an idiot to you, Croswell?'

'N – No, sir,' said Pete. He swallowed in fear.

'Schneider is never behind on his work,' said Mr Smaug. 'And he's too much of a pussy to start a fight.' Pete couldn't help but smirk.

'Oh, you find that amusing?' said Mr Smaug, with a raised eyebrow. 'You better wipe that shit-eating grin off your face, Croswell. Now get out of my sight!'

Pete scurried towards the door faster than a speeding bullet to heaven. Dylan was relieved, he couldn't believe his hard work had finally paid off and the boss had taken notice of his efforts. For a second, he wondered if the boss was on his side. He wasn't.

'Grow a pair, Schneider,' said Mr Smaug. 'You got a good work ethic, kid. But if you want to climb the ranks, you need to stop being a bitch. Otherwise, you'll get eaten alive.'

Dylan looked down in embarrassment.

‘Now get out of here and be a normal human for once in your god-damn life,’ said Mr Smaug. ‘And when you come back, I want this mess cleaned up. Otherwise, I’m crackin’ skulls.’

‘Okay, sir,’ said Dylan. He didn’t need to think twice about going to lunch anymore. Now it was an order. He put his earphones on, grabbed his backpack, and dashed towards the exit.

Jane was leaning against the wall outside. She noticed Dylan stumble through the spinning doors like a clueless oaf and couldn’t help but smile. She was used to receiving a lot of unwanted attention in the workplace. It was the small price she paid for being attractive - not that it was her choice. Some of the older men gawked and stared, which made her feel uncomfortable. And some of the older women were hostile towards her. Dylan told her it was because they envied her youth and attractiveness. That’s why she enjoyed his company.

‘I heard yelling,’ said Jane. ‘What the hell happened?’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ said Dylan. ‘So, where’s this awesome place you had in mind for lunch?’

‘Lucky Landing,’ said Jane. ‘I recently became a vegan, and they’ve got an awesome vegan menu. But there’s heaps of other stuff for you, too.’

‘Sounds good,’ said Dylan.

They started walking together. Dylan took out one of the earphones and passed it to Jane. She popped it into her ear and listened.

‘This is the latest album by Childish Gambino. It’s pretty dope!’ said Dylan.

‘I like it,’ said Jane.

Suddenly, the earphone was yanked out of her ear. Dylan was pushed into the ground from behind. It was Pete, and he was with his two cronies, Hamish and Kyle. They were much bigger and taller than Dylan. He stood no chance, especially against three of them, but that didn’t stop him from trying. Dylan threw a punch with all his might, but Pete caught it and smiled. He socked Dylan in the stomach and he fell to his knees.

‘You’re slow, even when falling.’ said Pete.

‘You’re such an asshole,’ screamed Jane.

‘What are you doing with this loser, Jane? Come to lunch with us. My shout. I’ll treat you real nice – the way a woman should be treated.’

‘I’d rather die,’ scoffed Jane.

Dylan had no time to catch his breath. Pete kicked him in the stomach. Jane came to his defence and scratched Pete on the cheek, but that made matters worse. Pete moved Jane aside, placed his hands around Dylan’s throat and lifted him off the ground.

‘Let go of him, you mouth-breathing jerk!’ yelled Jane. Hamish and Kyle pulled her away.

‘Get your hands off me!’ she screamed. A small crowd gathered around, and more than half of the spectators started recording on their smartphones. Pete coiled his enormous hands around Dylan’s throat like a boa constrictor squeezing the life out of its prey. It looked like a scene

from a nature documentary. But there were no cameras, dramatic music or whimsical narration. There was only the wretched sound of a man gasping and wheezing for air.

‘Somebody do something – please!’ cried Jane.

Dylan’s eyes rolled around. He was about to lose consciousness. Suddenly, a slender looking man appeared out of nowhere. Nobody saw where he came from, and he didn’t even make a sound. His footsteps were silent and nimble.

The man had a slim build, about average height, with dishevelled hair and austere clothes. He looked nothing like a hero or a fighter – quite the opposite. But he looked unfazed. The man was calm and expressionless. He stood in silence for a moment, and then politely tapped Pete on the shoulder. Nobody could believe what they were seeing. Whispers of hope and fear swept across the crowd.

‘Excuse me,’ he said, in a gentle tone and with a warm smile. ‘Could you please let go of that man? There is no need for unnecessary violence.’ Pete was incensed and turned toward the brittle-looking man.

‘You got some nerve, chink,’ said Pete. ‘Now I’m going to have to break you instead.’ Pete’s eyes widened, and he looked like a bloodthirsty gargoyle. With a thunderous step towards his new prey, he entered striking distance, but the mysterious man didn't move a muscle. He remained composed and nonchalant and calmly watched every move. He waited and waited... and waited some more.

Pete hurled his two-tonne fist towards the strange man. And that's exactly when he reacted. In a single fluid motion, he unsheathed a wooden sword strapped to his back and landed three successive strikes with lightning-fast pace and lethal precision. Pete collapsed onto the ground almost instantaneously. Nobody knew what happened.

'You are oversized, unbalanced and too aggressive,' said the strange man, still in a polite and respectful tone. He dusted off his shoulders and placed the wooden sword back into the sheath. 'Without proper training and technique, you will never be a match for me. Now, does anyone know where I can get some food around here?'

Dylan staggered to his feet. It was the first time he was able to look down at Pete for a change. It was a nice feeling.

'T-Thank you,' said Dylan, in a raspy voice. The man looked at him and nodded. There was something strange about him. He emanated strong but soothing energy. Dylan felt comfortable around him. Jane did, too, and she was a better judge of character.

'I know the perfect place,' said Jane. 'Come with us. We're heading there now.'

'My treat', said Dylan. His voice became a little clearer. 'It's the least I can do.'

'No need to thank me,' said the man. 'But I will accept your offer. I'm starving!'

'What's your name, stranger?' asked Jane.

'Zan,' said the man.



## Chapter 2:

There were many popular cafes in the inner-city, but there was something special about Lucky Landing. It was nothing extraordinary on the outside - an old and tattered warehouse with a graffiti mural painted on the side, no different to all the other buildings in the street. But the inside was an effervescent café with wood-grain tables and chairs. Rays of sunlight beamed through the enormous sunroof, which brightened the room and nourished all the vines and plants cascading down from the ceilings and walls. The tantalizing aroma of fresh coffee filled the air.

It was a place where people of all sorts came to eat, talk, work, read the news, and debate ideas. It was a kind of laboratory for democracy. Here, it didn't matter who you were or what you did. Everyone was the same. The staff were energetic and friendly, the music was good, and the food was great.

'This is smashed avocado,' said Jane, pointing towards her plate. 'Two pieces of toast, covered in wholesome green mush, mixed with feta, rocket, lemon and dukkha. You'll like it, Zan. Trust me.'

Zan studied the food like it was an art piece – and it pretty much was. There were intent and purpose behind every detail. It looked like something from a hipster's wet dream.

'This is the reason none of us can afford to buy a house,' said Dylan.

‘Oh...’ said Zan. He looked puzzled and had to think twice about taking a bite. But hunger got the better of him.

‘And the four-dollar coffees,’ said Jane. ‘The millennials sure are a wretched bunch. The whole lot of us.’ She chuckled into the palm of her hand. Zan didn’t understand.

‘So, where are you from?’ asked Dylan.

‘Kanazawa,’ replied Zan.

‘Never heard of it,’ said Jane. ‘What’s it like?’

‘Pleasant,’ said Zan. ‘It has the best teahouses in the world.’

‘Oh, cool,’ said Jane. ‘Well, this place has the best cappuccino. See what you think’.

Zan took a sip. It was the first time he had ever tasted coffee, and the bitterness caught him off guard. He scrunched his face and quickly downed a sip of water. Dylan laughed and took a sip too. But someone accidentally bumped into him as they were passing through behind him. It spilled all over Zan. He looked unimpressed.

‘Oh my god!’ said Dylan. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Zan looked annoyed. Jane panicked and quickly handed him a few napkins.

‘Why did you spill the coffee?’ said Zan.

Dylan turned white. He looked like he was about to have a panic attack.

‘Someone bumped into me,’ said Dylan.

‘Wrong answer,’ said Zan.

Dylan and Jane looked at each other. Their new friend looked like he was turning into a foe.

‘You spilled the coffee because coffee was in the cup,’ said Zan, with a smile. ‘If it had been tea, you would have spilled tea. Whatever is inside the cup will come out’.

Dylan and Jane were relieved. It was just a joke and a pretty bad one at that. They couldn’t help themselves and burst out laughing. Bits and pieces of food flew in all directions. It was like a smashed avocado supernova. Zan laughed too. Although he wasn’t sure if they were laughing at him or with him.

‘That was such a Dad joke,’ replied Jane. ‘Have you been on another planet or something?’

‘No, I’ve been on Earth,’ said Zan. ‘Training and meditating in solitude for about six years’.

‘Oh...’ said Jane, ‘That kind of... makes a lot of sense.’

‘Is there where you got that badass sword?’ said Dylan.

‘This is not a sword,’ said Zan. ‘This is a bokken. Made from a single piece of Loquat wood.’

Dylan looked disappointed.

‘A wooden sword?’ he said. ‘What good is that? May as well use Nan’s walking stick.’

Zan was offended.

‘Loquat wood is durable, resilient, and balanced,’ said Zan, in a deeper and more aggressive tone. He stood up and unsheathed the

bokken from his back. 'It is softer than oak and does less damage on the surface. But the force of impact is much deeper. A few hits in the right places, and you won't be able to move.'

Dylan and Jane were stunned. They were still learning the boundaries with their new friend. Zan seemed a little odd, but at least he wasn't malicious, and more interesting than anyone at Madgwicks & Smaug.