

# DreamRovers



## Price of Deliverance

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## Chapter 1: A Stranger's Dream



INDRA KNEW BETTER THAN to enter a stranger's dream, but this was a perfect opportunity. A flash of sickly yellow invaded the relatively peaceful indigo mist of the dreamscape. Yellow dreams meant illness. Illness meant that she might be able to help, and helping meant she might prove that dreamrovers were ordinary people, not monsters. She'd be able to leave more often. She wouldn't have to fear people.

Indra peered into the dream through mist that blurred it like a transparent curtain. A stout man danced across red woolen broadcloth while birds shaped like buttons swooped down at him. He batted the button-birds away with practiced ease, and they flew across the room. A man's fine silk coat fell over, joining the cloth underfoot.

If she woke him, he might be able to get help. Indra leaned into the dream, and appeared sitting cross-legged on the wine-red cloth. The dreamer paused, and so did the birds, hanging strangely in midair.

"You probably ought to wake up," she said.

He showed no alarm at her appearance. In reality, he would react, maybe judging from her colorless hair what she was. If he knew she was a dreamrover, he'd throw rocks.

"I should," he said, "but I can't seem to manage it."

He knew he was dreaming, and yet he hadn't awoken. The illness must be serious. Waking him wasn't likely to help then, but if she calmed him, he might enter deep sleep and heal faster.

"Wait!" he cried. "I know what you are."

A weapon appeared in the dreamer's hands—a sword? No, a spear. It couldn't hurt her, but if he woke up suddenly, she'd be forced into reality with him. "You're a dreamrover. Why are you here? Stealing my secrets? Spying on my mind?"

The last thing dreamrovers needed was more bad publicity. "I'm trying to help," Indra said.

The cloth below their feet moved, higher and brighter, until it was not wine-red cloth at all but consuming flames. Indra felt nothing. The man cried out, but his yelp was lost behind the crackling of the fire. "Why aren't you burned up?"

Indra tried to make her voice calming. "The flames can't hurt anyone. They're not real."

He writhed. He really could feel the heat, Indra realized. Probably feverish in reality.

The dreamer began to race around the walls of the shop, which spun in a dizzying blur.

"Wait, calm down," Indra cried. "You won't get better that way! Your button-birds are bringing water." He seemed to like the idea; the buttons began to move again, tipping this way and that, but the water that rained from the sky had no effect on the fire. No sizzle of steam, no smoke, no hint of coldness on her skin—dreamers never did seem to think of details like that.

"The fire can't hurt you," Indra said. "It feels good, in fact. Can't you see the snowstorm out the window?"

A hole opened in the walls, to reveal a blustering white and blue world outside. "Good thing you're not out there, huh?" Indra said. "The fire's all right. It's stuck in a..." She paused. She'd been about to say fireplace, but that was too logical. "It's stuck in a chamber pot."

The fire around them leapt into an oversized orange pot, leaving the dreamer again standing on cloth, this time ivory-white. "Dangerous business, tailoring," the man said. "Cloth is very flammable, you know."

"But frog skin isn't."

The cloth under their feet turned slimy green.

The dreamer faced her. Indra hoped his expression was more curious than hostile, but in the vague shapes of the dream, she couldn't tell. "What do you want from me?" he demanded. "I'm

nobody important. I don't have any secrets you can exploit. You can't take my shop. You can't haunt my dreams..."

"I wouldn't do that!"

"Oh." He leaned back, and his voice was suddenly vacant. "All right then."

Something fell from the ceiling. Snow? No, water, ocean water that fell around them, filling the room. The tailor climbed onto a table, which began to rock and rock above the waves. His eyes closed. The world was not so yellow. Indra beamed. Maybe she'd helped after all.

"What are you doing here?"

Indra whirled around. A figure had appeared from nowhere, more solid and colorful than anything in the dream. She could see every detail, from fur cap to well-worn boots. His clothes were rough but well-kept, and he carried a small bag. "You're a rover," she said.

He held a finger to his lips, but the dreamer was idly petting one of his button-birds and didn't seem to notice them.

The stranger stepped forward, and the faint sound of his clothes rustling told Indra that he was physically present.

"You can tread too," she said.

"Obviously. But you don't have his permission to be here!" He pointed to the dreamer, who peeked at them through unfocused eyes.

"Do you have permission?"

"I came to cure his fever. I cleaned his wounds and gave him medicines." He lifted a small black bag in one hand. Indra raised an eyebrow. Taking items through the dreamscape, even small ones, took serious skill. "You, on the other hand... this random eavesdropping is what gives rovers a bad name!"

He didn't understand. The dreamscape was her home, no matter what dreamer happened to be connected to it.

"I was calming him down," Indra said. "I wanted to teach him we're not so scary."

She shouldn't have said 'we'. The stranger was scary. His face was pale and drawn, with purple shadows under his blue-ish eyes.

"Isn't that what you're doing?" she asked. "Healing people so they don't fear us?" He couldn't be earning much money, or he'd be better dressed.

“I’ve done all I can at home. At least here I can make a difference.” Then he started, as though he hadn’t realized he’d spoken aloud. “You’d better leave! You weren’t invited here!”

Indra shrank back. She couldn’t stay out of the dreamscape, but she didn’t dare contradict him.

How had reality followed her into the dreamscape?

Behind the stranger, the dreamer’s eyes closed. The room blurred. Soon he would be in deep sleep, and his dreams would fade away. Indra leaned through a wall into the indigo mist of the dreamscape. It swirled over her arms, made patterns against her skin.

She didn’t see the stranger anymore. The current had swept him some other way.

It didn’t matter.

She let the current tug her away, watching the flashes of dreams glide past.



Walker’s boots crunched through layers of snow. Cold bit his nose and the few inches of his face not protected by his beard. Meat that had been a rabbit hung from one hand, cleaned and ready. Out of habit, his unhurried tread took him from cover to cover—behind a boulder, a stand of small pines, a ridge of earth.

His latest camp appeared, a simple shelter of heaped snow. A circle of blackened earth showed where he’d banked the coals of yesterday’s fire. The dry wood to start it again lay hidden under a camouflaged roof between two scrub oak trees. He scanned the camp twice until he was certain that no one else had been here, and then eased into the open.

A rooster emerged from the dark entrance of the snow cave. His feathers bounced comically as he ran. Walker couldn’t suppress a smile. Robbie probably only cared about the handful of grain in Walker’s pocket, but the attention was still flattering. The old scars that marked him as a fighting bird, before Walker had rescued him, were now covered by thick golden feathers, and his beady eyes were bright.

Walker was halfway across the clearing when a brown flash shot from the sky. A hawk, or an eagle. It didn't matter. The predator collided with Robbie in an explosion of feathers.

"Get out of here!"

A shout should have startled the predator, but Walker's voice was too rough, too low. He hadn't used it much lately. The hawk looked up at him, frozen for the moment, wings held up to shield its prey, fierce eyes fixed on him.

Walker ran at it, waving his arms. The hawk waited until Walker was a few feet away. Then it launched into the sky, and was gone.

Robbie was still breathing, but there were deep slashes through his neck and back, on top of his old scars.

Walker's hands trembled as he picked him up. He often hunted quail and grouse and other rooster-like birds. Mourning this one was ridiculous, but he couldn't stop his shaking hands.

Robbie didn't struggle. Maybe it was shock, but Walker liked to think it was trust.

"Poor thing," said a girl's voice.

Walker jumped, more startled than when the hawk had dived. A girl of perhaps thirteen was walking to him across the snow. Walker had seen no one but soldiers in two years—no women, and certainly no children.

The girl took off a threadbare coat several sizes too large, revealing a simple homespun dress. Her tangled brown hair framed a gaunt face. She leaned forward and bound her coat around Robbie's torn back.

It wouldn't help. Walker didn't have the heart to tell her. Robbie might cling to life another day or two, but the shock or infection would get him if the wound didn't, and then he'd be gone—Walker's only companion, his only link to his old life. The only part of it he wanted to remember.

"My brother is a doctor," the girl said. "Maybe he can help your chicken."

"Your brother?" Walker peered around the snowy clearing. No one was there.

"Our camp's this way." She took his hand. Warmth spread through his fingers, though he wore gloves and she did not.

She led him over a small rise. A man was leaning against a tree nearby. Walker should have heard someone so close. The hawk must have driven it from his mind.

The man was much older than his sister, closer to Walker's twenty. His face was nearly hidden by a fur cap, but what Walker could see was drawn, unnaturally pale, with deep shadows under his eyes.

"I'm Norma," the girl said, "and this is my brother Leo."

Leo's eyes darted from his sister to Walker, who withdrew his hand from hers. He knew how he appeared—unshaven, dirty, dressed in badly sewn furs—and he must smell revolting. Not someone you would want around your kid sister. But Leo didn't ask any questions. He bent over Robbie and unwrapped him with steady hands. Walker tried not to squirm as the stranger's face came within feet of his own. Leo said nothing about the bloodied coat. Everyone Walker had known would have berated Norma over this use of it, and none of them needed warm clothes half so much as she did.

"We can try bandages," Leo said, but his voice lacked hope, "and I can make a poultice at camp."

"I don't think..." Walker croaked.

Leo must not have heard him. He retreated further into the hills. His trudging feet left wide gashes in the snow.

He led them uphill, to a thin copse of pine trees. Walker berated himself for imagining eyes watching him from the shadows. Then one pair of eyes moved into the open, revealing a red-headed toddler wrapped in a worn blanket. More faces appeared. Walker had lived in the mountains too long to believe in ghosts or demons. These had to be real people, yet they seemed unearthly. Shell-shocked eyes followed his every move. No one spoke. Even facing Robbie's loss, Walker knew that the worse tragedy was here.

A man emerged from a simple hut of woven branches. His shoulder-length auburn hair was unkempt, and stubble marked his cheeks. He had the same blue-hazel eyes as Leo and Norma, and Walker guessed he was their father. His glazed eyes slid past Walker without seeing him. He beckoned to Leo, who shrank back.

"I've done all I can," Leo murmured.

"I know." The father's voice was as hoarse as Walker's had been. "Go anyway. She's asking for you."



Leo ducked inside the hut and his father took his place. He looked down at Norma, bare-armed and shivering, then at Walker with the bloody bird in his arms. "Can we help you?"

"No," Walker said. "I can help you."

He meant to ask a question, but the words came out forcefully. Their need was evident in every face.

"You don't want to get tangled up with us," the father said.

Walker shook his head. "My reputation has nothing to lose."

"But we're dreamrovers."

The man must be distracted to admit that to a stranger. No wonder the family had so little. They must have fled when their abilities were discovered. Otherwise they would have been beaten, or executed... and it was Walker's fault.

"So am I," Walker said.

One of the onlookers gasped. Huge eyes opened even wider.

The father stared at Walker as though he'd grown wings. Then, at last, recognition flashed through his eyes. "You're like us."

"In a way." Walker extended his hand. "I'm Walker Filmasa."

The man's expression didn't change. He hadn't heard of One-Shot Walker then. Good. Walker could help for a little while before they drove him away.

"I'm Bridgley." The stranger's grip was unexpectedly firm.

A terrible hacking cough made both look up. This must be the 'she' that had asked for Leo.

"What do you need?" Walker asked. "Food? I can hunt..."

Bridgley looked away. "I can hunt. Should have gone before, but Aura..." He looked back at the shelter. "My wife has pneumonia. I have to stay with her. I... I don't think she's going to make it."

Norma whimpered. A large black dog placed its paw on her worn shoe. The dog seemed to be taking exile better than the rest of them—its ribs were hidden under glossy fur.

A late snow had carpeted the mountains two weeks ago, and cold temperatures kept it from melting. Norma wasn't the only one with inadequate clothing—a boy of perhaps ten wore only a nightshirt. No wonder they were getting pneumonia.

"I can help you," Walker said again. He could do something, at least a little, to make up for the prejudice he'd unleashed. He set

Robbie into Bridgley's arms. "Salvage what meat you can. I'm going out for more."

Then he walked, arms empty, into the hills. If nothing else, he could retrieve the rabbit.



Indra stumbled onto the trail of a new rover in the dreamscape. In the swirling mist, she could tell very little about him, except that she recognized him somehow. That surprised her. The dreamscape was infinitely large, and the number of dreamrovers small. She'd only met a few and could name even fewer.

The figure ahead was small in presence—possibly a small person, or else a newcomer to dreamroving. Or both. They were unlikely to yell at her, but Indra kept her distance. Other people meant ties to reality, and she had plenty of time before she needed to anchor.

The stranger drifted into an individual's dream. No, this one wouldn't yell, if they were entering dreams themselves. She followed as close as she could without entering the dream, and peered through the misty curtain. A large balcony took up most of her vision. The dreamer—and the other rover—must be there.

Indra leaned into the dream. She landed on the roof of a turreted castle, looking down at the balcony. She imagined tar on her hands, and the dream obliged, sticking her safely to the edge.

Below, an old man sat on a cushioned throne, petting a bird—no, a griffin—beside him. A small boy, maybe five or six years old, stood facing the man. The dreamer's bushy eyebrows went up. "Smallest nit I've seen yet." His voice echoed, adding a grand tone despite the harsh words.

Now Indra recognized the boy. She'd caught him roving several times, and when her lessons on staying inside his own dreams had done no good, she'd tried to keep an eye on him. A child that age shouldn't be seeing the kind of horrors that could appear in people's subconscious. But here he was.

"I'm not a nit!" he cried. "Nits are bugs!"

The griffin leapt at the boy. Its beak dug into his shoulder. It couldn't hurt him, not really, but the boy screamed.

Indra would have to interfere. She let the image of tar fade and leapt onto the balcony. She landed lightly, like a dancer, and positioned herself

between the boy and the old dreamer. “You’re some hero, picking on a child!”

The boy pushed the griffin aside. “Dream lady!”

The dreamer straightened. “No dreamrover messes with Fenton Filketo, child or no.” He grew several inches, and waved a sword that he hadn’t had a moment ago.

A non-rover shouldn’t have that much control over his dreams.

Indra set a protective hand on the boy’s shoulder. It was solid, and warm, covered in a ragged shift. Indra almost fell out of the dream. The boy wasn’t just roving. Somehow, he’d brought his body along into the dreamscape. Indra was treading too, but that was risky, even dangerous, for a beginner.

The dreamer, Fenton, was still sneering at the two of them. “Nits make lice. Easier to squash them when they’re small.”

“Your seat is made of honey,” Indra retorted.

The man sank through his throne-like chair. The sticky substance dragged him down. “Cursed dreamrover!” he snarled.

“Your griffin likes honey,” Indra added.

“He won’t attack me. He’s mine!”

“I’m sure he won’t,” Indra said, “but I bet it’s not too comfortable getting the honey nipped off you by that beak.”

The man gave a terrified yelp as the griffin bounded at him. While he struggled to regain control, Indra examined the little rover. “Rule number one for influencing dreams: make it strange. Dreamers’ minds can’t resist playing with a strange new idea, even if it’s unpleasant. Especially if it’s unpleasant.”

“Is this a dream?” the boy interrupted.

Ah. She’d started too fast. Such a young child would need a slower explanation. “Yes. This is a dream. His dream.” She pointed at the man.

“Why can’t I wake up?”

She smiled. “You can wake up from your own dreams? That’s pretty good for someone so young. You can’t wake up now because you aren’t dreaming. You treading—you brought your body inside the dreamscape.”

The boy stared with his head cocked, and Indra realized she’d gone too fast again. “I’ll help you get out,” Indra said, “but not here. You wouldn’t want to wake up next to this guy. Can you see the mist at the edge of the dream?”

But maybe she should have been fast after all. The walls of the castle were trembling violently. The dreamer’s eyes shone with triumph. Perhaps

the boy wasn't the only one who could wake up at will.

Indra grabbed the boy's arm. "Quickly now. Lean into the mist..."

But the world was pinching around them, blacker and blacker.

Indra's eyes opened. She was lying on thick carpet, breathing air tainted by perfume. The dreamer was rich, possibly a courtier. That was a bad sign. Courtiers had formed the laws against dreamroving in the first place.

A warm hand was still clutching her own. She sat up, and groaned. She and the little boy were on the floor of a grandly furnished bedroom, and the man who had threatened them was rising out of bed.

# DreamRovers



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Dreaming can be dangerous...

Indra has lived in dreams since her mother's death. It's a lonely life, but it keeps her safe and connected to her mother's memory. Joining other people would tether her to reality, but she'd gain the family she always wanted—if they survive long enough.

Fifteen-year-old Norma lost everything when her village discovered her family's abilities. When her sister insists that dreamrovers are wrong, Norma must decide between her dreams and her family.

Walker escaped court life two years ago, when the rest of his family was executed for dreamroving. Helping other rovers build a new home might make up for his mistakes, especially his actions that ignited the dreamrover prejudice.

As persecution grows, all three struggle to defend their new family. Hatred runs deep, and escape is no longer an option—not even through dreams.