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SEAN
WILLIAMS

THE
STONE MAGE
AND THE SEA

FIRST BOOK OF THE CHANGE

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 **brio**
BOOKS

CHAPTER 1
LIGHT ON THE SAND



Father and son were on the run when they came to Fundelry, a small, coastal village on the stretch of the Strand known by its ancient name of Gooron. The sun was low in the sky, shining wanly through a spattering of wispy clouds. Kneeling on the front passenger seat, Sal clutched the roll bar with one hand to keep his balance as the buggy bounced along a winding path through the dunes. Its engine grumbled when his father tapped the accelerator; prickly grass and scrub crunched loudly under its wheels. He couldn't hear the sea over the racket as he supposed he should by now.

His father didn't like being this close to the sea and, although Sal didn't know why that was so, some of that nervousness rubbed off on him, too. It was impossible to avoid. Tension showed in the way his father drove. His knuckles were white around the wheel, his movements

quick, almost curt: accelerating sharply when a wheel lost traction, then braking just as quickly when a slope turned out to be steeper than expected. His gaze flicked restlessly to the fuel gauge, to the gear lever, to his son, to the scrub whipping by, and to the way ahead, as though he were uncertain about which way he was going.

Why he had brought them so, deep into Sky Warden territory, Sal had no idea.

“How much longer?” Sal asked. The dunes around them were too high to see over, even standing on the seat. If Sal had ever been so close to the sea before, he couldn’t remember it.

“I’m not sure. Have you been counting the milestones?”

“Yes. One hundred and thirteen.”

“The man in Gliem said less than a hundred. He must’ve been wrong.” Sal’s father shrugged. “Still, we should be there by sunset. If it’s light, we can have a look around and see what’s on offer. Maybe grab something to eat. And then...”

His voice trailed off. Sal knew what usually would have followed: find a room for the night, or for a few nights perhaps; the next day, find a job to help replenish the buggy’s alcohol reserves; locate another destination—the next town along the Strand, or even the next region—then move on. The most important thing of all was to stay hidden from the Sky Wardens.

And that was how it normally went as they traveled across the Strand together: they arrived, they stayed briefly and unremarkably, then they left. Only this time, Sal was coming to suspect, was different from the others.

The sandy road doglegged sharply, took them back

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almost the way they had come. Through a gap between two particularly large dunes, Sal saw the sky as it would appear closer to the horizon, a markedly lighter blue than it was overhead. Gray specks wheeled over something in that new distance. He thought he could hear the harsh cries of birds he had read about but never seen before.

Gulls.

The path joined a worn but sealed road before entering town. Its waysigns were faded; clearly, the road saw few travelers. Fundelry promised similar facilities to the thousands of other towns along the Strand, and these included a hostel, a bath house, a school, a fishery, a grain silo and an ironmonger who doubled as a mechanic. No surprises there, apart from the last: engineers of any sort were rare this far from the Interior, where metalworking was common. But that knowledge was welcome; the buggy had clocked its odometer limit many times over and could always use a proper service. The last had been four months and a thousand kilometers away, in Nuud.

They followed the sealed road southward at speed, relishing the relative smoothness of the ancient tarmacadam and the wind sweeping through their hair. Sal whooped, forgetting his uncertainty in the joy of the moment, and his father smiled at the sound. Few ancient roads had survived the ravages of time, and they rarely saw any other motorised transport so close to the coast. Sal and his father were alone on the entire length of this road; it was theirs to enjoy, for the moment.

Then they hit the edge of town and they were forced to slow down, because the road disintegrated immediately, as though an ages-lost machine had run out of tar at that point and never returned to finish the job. With sand once again under their wheels, and acutely conscious of the sound of the motor breaking the sleepy silence, they trundled slowly into town.

The ironmonger-cum-mechanic wasn't far beyond the municipal border. At the familiar sign of crossed spanners, they drew off the road and under the shelter of a low, rusted verandah. With a crunch of gears, the buggy jerked to a halt. Sal's father climbed out and removed his hat in order to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

A dark-skinned man in heavily patched overalls stepped from the shadows under the verandah. Young but care-worn, as though he had always endured life rather than reveled in it, he wore a charm of polished brown stones threaded on a thong tied around his neck.

"That's either a Comet or a fair copy," he said, indicating the buggy.

"A copy," Sal's father replied, "but it serves us well enough."

"That's all that matters. You've obviously looked after it." The mechanic strode forward, holding out his hand. "Josip."

"Gershom," said Sal's father, his voice economical, wasting no energy. They shook hands firmly. "This is Sal. Short for Salomon."

"But getting taller by the day, eh? How old are you, boy?"

"Twelve."

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“A good age.”

Sal nodded politely, fascinated more by the mechanic's charm necklace than by anything he had to say. Like the man's trade, it was an oddity along the Strand, where people used Sky Warden charms made of crystals and feathers instead of stone. Even odder was the fact that Josip didn't have the fair skin of someone from the Interior, as Sal did, to explain the charm's origins. Sal couldn't imagine how Stone Mage lore could have made it so far south.

“Are there rooms near here?” his father asked. “We'll be staying the night.”

“See Von. She runs the hostel on the main square. It's not much, but she's reasonable and you look like you could use that.”

“Work?”

“Harvest is over, but...” Josip the mechanic thought for a moment. “Come back tomorrow. I'll see what I can rustle up.”

Sal's father nodded his thanks and put an arm around Sal and together they headed back to the buggy.

The mechanic's call followed them: “You can leave that in here, if you want.” He was pointing at an open shed full of boxes and tools next to the verandah. “I can make space, and you'll keep the keys, of course. It'll be less obvious than parking in the open.”

Sal's father hesitated for a second, automatically reluctant to trust a stranger too far. But...

“True,” he said. “Thank you.”

The mechanic smiled as though they'd bestowed an honor on him, and moved off to find room for the buggy.

Sal studied the town as they walked along the main

road, still heading south. It felt the same as all the places he had visited over the years; in some ways, though, it was very different. There was sand everywhere he looked: underfoot, piled in drifts against buildings, filling up corners where it hadn't been swept away. The air smelled strongly of salt. As well as crumbling stone structures rarely more than a single story high, they passed shanties leaning in hollows by the road, as though made of driftwood deposited by a freak storm that might return at any moment to sweep them away again.

Having spent his entire life on the move, Sal quite liked Fundelry's air of impermanence. It made sense to him. Its proximity to the sea, though, was another thing entirely.

Few people came out to watch them pass. He supposed the others were working: fishing, or repairing nets, or teaching children, or doing whatever else the villagers here did this late in the day. The ones he did see were darker in color than his father, whose skin was light brown rather than black, and they were much darker than Sal. The villagers stared openly at them as they passed, making him feel uncomfortable. They stood out as strangers in every place they went, but they rarely encountered such open curiosity.

When they reached the local census building, they stopped to check in. The Strand administrators were as strict about procedure as they were about democracy, and the Sky Wardens imposed stiff penalties on those who failed to declare their movements. The forms Sal's father completed were yellow with age, giving the impression that such formalities were rarely needed here.

"You just passing through?" asked the young woman

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behind the counter with an air of distrust.

“Maybe.” Sal’s father’s false signature entwined around itself like a snake. “Is there much to see or do around here?”

“No.”

“It’s lovely weather, anyway.”

“It can change overnight.”

Sal’s father smiled, but said nothing.

“Do you know where you’ll be staying?”

“We’re looking for a hostel run by someone called ‘Von’.”

This only seemed to confirm the woman’s poor impression of them. “Up the road, on the far side of the main square.”

“Thanks.” Sal’s father made to leave, then stopped as though a thought had just occurred to him. “I don’t suppose you know a man named Payat Misseri?”

“Should I?”

“He was an old friend. I heard he passed through here at some time or another.”

“If he’s not from here, I don’t see how you can expect me to have heard of him.”

“I thought it was your job to know these things.”

She sniffed. “I’m only filling in for Bela. She’s gone home.”

“Well, maybe we’ll come back in the morning.”

“We’re closed tomorrow.”

His smile didn’t falter. “Another day, then. Goodbye.”

When they emerged from the office, the sun was setting. For the first time, Sal consciously noted the sound of the sea. He recognized it instantly, even though he had never heard it before. It hissed like an asthmatic giant trying to sneak up on them.

His father stood on the steps of the office for a moment, looking around. “Now where? Bed or browse?”

Sal shrugged, tired from the long drive but too nervous to sleep. He didn’t think a third option—to leave—was open to him, even though their reception so far had been far from welcoming.

“It’ll be dark soon,” his father said, answering his own question. “We should at least find a room before they close their doors.”

Sal shifted his pack into a more comfortable position as they walked along the street. Everything they owned, apart from the buggy, rested on his and his father’s backs. It would make a pleasant change to sleep indoors, if they could find somewhere to take them. Part of him hoped they wouldn’t.

As they headed deeper into town, the buildings became more solid, as though the outer fringes were an afterthought, and a temporary one at that. Nothing appeared to be open. The main square was instantly recognizable, even though it wasn’t a square at all. It was a large, circular space of densely packed sand surrounded by shop fronts and storehouses. A water pump at its center marked the focus, several low benches gave it character, and eight metal poles taller than a person and topped with glass globes delineated its edge. Well-worn lanes issued in every direction from the square.

One of these lanes led south to the sea. The end of the road, Sal thought. Through the growing gloom he could see a gray mass of water heaving and shifting barely a hundred yards away, with little but a stretch of low dunes to keep it at bay. It looked dangerous. The sight—or perhaps

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just a sudden chill in the air—made him shiver.

There was only one hostel facing the square: a squat, two-story building that might have been the oldest in town. Its windows were shuttered. Sal's father strode up to the verandah and knocked once on the door.

It opened immediately. Light spilled out into the square, silhouetting a tall woman with wild, orange hair. The light behind her cast her face in shadow, giving her a threatening air.

"What do you want?" she asked with a voice like two rocks scraping together.

"A room."

"Can you pay?" Sal noticed that her hand was firmly on the door, ready to slam it in their faces.

"With coin."

"That'd make a nice change." The woman's eyes seemed to glint although no light shone on them. "Show me."

Sal turned around. His father reached into his pack and produced a small number of toughened glass disks. Sal heard them sliding over each other in his father's palm; he could almost identify them by sound alone, they were so few in number.

They seemed to satisfy the woman. "Come in, then." She turned to let them into a low-roofed reception hall lit by gas lanterns and smelling of stale bread.

Pulling a thick book out of a drawer in a desk along one wall, she noisily cleared her throat and wrote down the answers to her questions.

"It'll be fifteen per room. One or two? It's not as if I have a shortage this time of year."

"Just one. Two beds."

“How long for?”

“As long as we need.”

“No questions, huh?” She grunted. “I’m Von. Breakfast is included. You pay me one night in advance every morning and I’ll let you stay.”

The book slammed shut. Carrying a lamp, she showed them up a flight of stairs. Noticeable for the first time was a slight limp in her left leg. Sal wondered how she had come by the injury, and whether it had anything to do with the roughness of her voice.

At the top of the stairs were several guest rooms. Von led them to one in a corner of the building. Inside were two single beds, a chest of drawers, and a door leading to the floor’s common bathroom. The air smelled of dust and starch. Through the sole window, Sal could see the sky turning from red to gray with the last rays of the sun. The sea was black, invisible, a hole in the world.

Something flew past the window with a glint of eye and feathers, and he jumped, startled.

His father touched his arm. “What?”

Sal shook his head quickly, feeling stupid. “Just a gull.”

“I probably don’t need to tell you to keep it down,” Von said, less gruffly than before. “Just be aware that I do have another guest at the moment, and he likes his privacy. If you need anything in the night, use this,” she said, showing them a bell-pull by the door. “Otherwise, I’ll see you in the morning.”

Sal’s father nodded. “Thank you.”

With a last, long look at them, the woman put the lamp down on the chest of drawers, closed the door and left them alone.

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Sal picked the bed furthest from the window and hefted his pack onto it. His father sat down heavily on the other bed and removed his boots.

“It’s not so bad,” his father said, testing the mattress springs. “Better than the ground, anyway. See if you can get a breeze in here.”

Sal nervously went back to the window, and confronted his own reflection: black hair vanishing into the darkness of the falling night; light skin standing out like parchment on a puddle of ink. Glinting on the left side of his face was the silver ear-ring he had worn longer than he could remember, its three tiny holes looking like flecks of dust.

The window had been painted shut around the edges. No gulls surprised him this time. Without turning, he asked, “Dad?”

“Yes, Sal?”

“What are we doing here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you really looking for that man—the one you asked about at the office?” Although his father had described him as an old friend, Sal had never heard the name. “Is that why we’ve come here?”

“Misseri? Maybe.” His father smiled. “If I say ‘yes’, you’ll only ask me why I’m looking for him and I’ll be no better off.”

Sal was about to press his father for more information, when light flickering in the square below caught his eye. A lantern of some kind—although he could see no tell-tale flicker of flame—burned on one of the poles like a miniature yellow star. An oval-shaped pool glowed on the ground below it.

Another light flared to life, an eighth-turn around the square. This time Sal saw a dark figure stepping away into the shadows.

“There are some things you can’t run from, Sal,” his father went on. “It’s time I faced them head-on. They would’ve caught up with us in the end, anyway, here or elsewhere ...”

“What sort of things?”

In a darkened corner of the window, Sal’s father’s reflection shook its head. Where Sal was all lightness and dark, his father was the pale tan of kangaroo leather. Hair and skin and eyes were the same color, making it hard to tell his age. His father said Sal had inherited his looks from his mother—most especially his eyes, which were many shades of blue mottled with white flecks. But Sal’s father rarely spoke about her. He rarely spoke about anything important, these days.

Sal wondered if he was referring to the Sky Wardens. The men and women who controlled the Strand seemed as unreal to him as demons or ghosts, and he had had as much actual experience of them. The ones who chose not to live in the Haunted City were always on the move and usually easy to avoid. But unlike demons and ghosts, he knew that Sky Wardens were real. He had seen pictures of them and heard the stories. There had been a couple of close calls. He imagined them to be giants, with robes the same deadly blue as a desert sky. The crystal torcs they wore around their necks flashed like lightning in his mind, and their eyes saw into everything.

Sal didn’t know that they were, in fact, what his father was talking about, this time. Ever since Gliem, his father

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had been distracted and concerned, and Sal had worried that he might have done something wrong. But his father wasn't angry with him; he just seemed worried. The fact that he wouldn't talk about it only made Sal worry too.

Another light flickered into life below, and another, and the reflection of his father vanished, replaced by faint hints of movement through the glowing pools. Sal tried to follow them, but could not. He couldn't even be sure they were there at all.

Eight lights now burned on the square, and he noticed a handful more scattered through the town. They didn't banish the night, but they at least pushed it back a few meters. The town felt slightly friendlier for it.

But there was still the sea, churning away at the edge of his hearing—and a nagging feeling that he was being watched.

He stepped away from the window, and realized only then that his father had failed to respond to his last comment. Sal turned and saw that the man who called himself Gershom—which meant “exile” in a very ancient tongue—had fallen asleep fully clothed. Clearly no questions would be answered that night. Again.

Sal turned down the lamp and wished he could silence his own doubts so easily.

CHAPTER 2

THE ART IN HER EYES



The next morning, after a simple but filling breakfast of salty porridge and bread, Sal's father returned to the mechanic's, hoping for work. No mention was made of their conversation of the previous night. Sal did, however, get permission to go exploring.

"Just be careful," his father said in the hostel's hallway.

"I know, Dad. If there are any Sky Wardens here, I'll keep well away from them."

"Good." He looked as though he was about to say more, but changed his mind and went out the front door. Sal wasn't far behind.

The town was much livelier by mid-morning, with people of all ages out and about to beat the afternoon heat. He could hear them before he even left the hostel: children shouting and laughing; a dog barking a staccato counterpoint in the middle distance, excited by the ruckus; adults

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talking too quickly for him to follow. Stepping outside was like diving into a completely different world. He was grateful for the shadowy verandah to hide in.

The square was full of children of all ages; maybe forty in all. Some were playing, while others sat on benches reading from books or talking among themselves. A couple of adults sat to one side, watching as the children went about their activities. Occasionally they intervened, but more often they seemed content merely to observe.

This was the local version of School, he realized. During break; or maybe School was conducted in the square all the time. As long as the standard syllabus was dealt with, the Sky Wardens didn't care how each town went about it. Sal had seen Schools with very rigid codes of conduct and classrooms that looked more like prisons; he had seen ones where the teachers and students conversed as equals. He preferred to be taught by his father, who filled in as best he could when they were on the road.

Watching from the shadows, he knew he should join the students of Fundelry, and could do so at any time he wanted. But his father had given him the day off to settle in; that only happened in towns where they intended to stay longer than a week or two, and was more evidence that this wasn't an ordinary stop. He didn't want to waste his chance to find out why they had come to this place.

Sal turned away and walked along the verandah.

"Hey!"

He glanced back over his shoulder. A shock of white caught his eye: a solidly built teenager with white hair and pink skin. An albino. The albino was standing next to a small boy whose nose and ears would have looked more

at home on a bilby. The second boy was younger than Sal, and looked nervously at the albino's hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, you!"

The albino waved his free hand, but instead of replying Sal headed quickly down the side of the hostel, pretending he hadn't seen.

Putting the incident behind him, he headed west, parallel to where he knew the beach to be, although it was hidden by dunes on that side; he wasn't yet ready to face the sea, either. The sun was clear and the air smelled of fish. Gulls whirled above him, lazing on updraughts or swooping for scraps. Their cries competed strongly with the School behind him, producing an odd aural mix of people and birds.

The sound of human voices grew louder again as he walked. A couple of blocks on he discovered the reason why. There, a long, narrow road served as the town's market. Stalls and sellers were packed together in rough lines like too many plants crowding for a glimpse of sunlight. Vendors called out and buyers haggled over a constant background noise of clucking chickens and mewing alpacas, while idle browsers picked through the merchandise looking for bargains.

Sal kept an eye out for the sky-blue clothing worn by the Wardens, but saw none in evidence. Still, he was nervous as he walked through the crowd, admiring wooden carvings, dried fish, different types of grain, herbs and other produce. He didn't know whether the market was an everyday occurrence or whether he and his father had happened to arrive when it was active. Clearly, though, more than one town was involved. Fundelry possibly served as a gathering

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place for merchants and customers from neighboring communities as well as locals, with profits from the market supporting several cottage industries apart from fishing.

But the goods were irrelevant to him. He was more interested in the people. Not only was their skin universally darker than his, but they also had accents different from the ones he was used to inland. That made their cries more difficult to understand. Sometimes he felt they were calling in a completely different language or singing in an ancient tongue—the latter idea supported by the odd snippets of music he heard as he strolled cautiously through the crowd.

“Jewelry worn by the ancient Sun Line! Drum chili all the way from Yunda! Nets charmed here at half the going rate!”

The sound of a guitar and small flute playing a duet caught his ear and drew him in search of its source. Music was a novelty in his life. His father owned no instruments and had never encouraged him to learn, but he sought it out when he had the chance. Minstrels sometimes paid for tunes he had memorized from listening to songs in other towns. His memory for melody was good and he could sing well enough to get the idea across.

He followed the sound to a stall selling tools imported from the Interior. He studied a knife, shining in the center of the display, as he passed. The pommel was crudely fashioned, probably cobbled together from a broken blade and resold as new. Inland, such a poor job would never sell, but finely crafted metal was a novelty along the Strand. A good-looking fake might garner a high price among those who knew no better.

The music came from behind the stall. Before he could

slip between the stall and the tent next door, the occupant of the tent reached out a clawed hand to grab his sleeve.

“Fortune, son? You look like you could use a good telling.”

He found himself eye to eye with an ugly old woman. Her hair was bone-white in shocking contrast to her dark skin. Shaking his head, he tried to pull away, but her grip was every bit as strong as her gaze was piercing and her spiel relentless.

“I have sand, glass, dice and cards. I can do palms and irises as well, and will even look at the bumps on your head if that’s what you want. They’re all the same; it don’t matter which tool I use. When the Change is strong in someone, y’see, it comes out whether you ask it to or not. I’ll lend you some of mine, for a price. Just say the word, and the future will be yours.”

The stench billowing out of her tent made him gag.

“What?” she asked, drawing away. “Shark got your tongue?” She cackled. “You’re a quiet one, right enough, and I’d wager you don’t have any money, either. Why am I wasting my time with you? You should be in School, anyway.”

He thought desperately of his father’s warning not to attract any attention. “I—I’m sorry. I’ll go now, if you let me.”

The old woman’s fingers didn’t ease their grip. If anything, they tightened, and the hair on Sal’s arms tingled. He felt as though she was looking right into him, under his skin.

“Yes. You go on your way. I have things to do. And so do you, I wager.” Then she let go of him and pushed

him backward. “Aunty Merinda will give you one piece of advice for free: don’t eat Sancho’s pies. Unless you like dune rabbit, of course—which means cat round here.”

She cackled again and the meat vendor across the street cast her a dirty look.

Sal backed down the length of the market, away from the old woman’s stall. The music had gone. All he could hear now were the gulls again, squawking over the cries of the humans below, and he felt, for the second time, as though he was being watched.

He didn’t feel safe at the market after that. He explored the northwest side of town until midday, finding little else of note, until thirst forced him back to the hostel. His father still hadn’t returned—or, if he had, hadn’t left a note with Von. The proprietor of the hostel had a look in her eye that told him he wasn’t welcome to hang around, so he went back out into the streets, this time taking a bottle of water with him.

He had noticed on his return to the hostel that the square had emptied of older children, and now even the younger ones had disappeared. The earlier ruckus must have been a break, after all. He could hear toddlers laughing, not far away, and he was tempted to join the older kids’ classroom to get out of the heat. When he couldn’t find the class, though, a small part of him was relieved. He had been saved the embarrassment of walking unannounced into a roomful of strangers—a chore he had performed many times before, but never learned to like. The students must have taken the afternoon off, so joining them could wait another day. He wasn’t lonely on his own: he had had years to get used to it.

He headed east, away from the market this time, along a nondescript road that followed the line of the shore for a while then curved away north, inland. The sea was hidden by a series of high dunes sporting large tufts of grass and bushes. Grains of sand stung him every time the wind blew. The sky above was very blue, with only a few scattered clouds moving quickly from west to east. The scrub-lined road looped around a dozen or so empty-looking houses then joined the main road that led southward into town. He passed several small gardens along the way; the flowers were all either yellow or orange, and there were few trees larger than two or three meters high. A barren graveyard huddled in the lee of a low hill; most of the headstones were weathered or broken and the names were all unfamiliar: Vermeulen, Trowse, Kyriakidis, Bax ...

His puzzlement grew. Nothing he saw marked Fundelry as special; just another Strand town, no different from others he had visited, except that it was as close as he could get to the sea without standing in it. Left with the mystery of why they had come there, he found himself missing the things he was most familiar with: the sound of emptiness and the wind skimming the road; endless plains and the horizon unfolding around him; time spent alone with his father, thinking or telling stories; the earth rolling endlessly beneath him, one way or another.

Sal decided to turn right at the main road and head north, thinking he might find Josip the mechanic and see what his father was up to. Just before he reached the main road, a head ducked out of sight behind a wall. He half-saw it out of the corner of his eye. Startled, he looked to confirm the impression. There was nothing there, and he

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almost managed to convince himself that it hadn't been there at all. A glimpse of brown hair and a dark face—it could have been his eyes playing tricks on him.

But why, he asked himself, would they do that? They would see a flash of blue, or the glinting of a crystal torc, if he really wanted to scare himself. Still, he had an odd feeling that someone was nearby. It unsettled him, made him nervous. He wasn't the sort to imagine things.

As he turned to walk up the hill to Josip's along the road he and his father had walked the night before, he heard a faint noise very much like a footstep from the way he had just come. It certainly wasn't his water bottle sloshing. He told himself to keep walking up the hill without looking back. If someone *was* there, he didn't want to look guilty or afraid. He just wanted to get away.

At the census building where his father had filled out the forms, the sound came again. This time he did look back, and someone was definitely there. Too slow for him to miss, they ducked out of sight behind a fence. He walked faster. The hair had been a different color—black, rather than brown as before—but that didn't matter. *Be careful*, his father had warned him, and he intended to stay out of whatever trouble he might find himself in.

The footsteps started up again after the briefest of pauses. He broke into a trot, and the sound of pursuit intensified. He was being chased, and by more than one person. Instead of turning to confront them, he sped up. Within moments he was running with his head down, heartily glad he'd left his pack at the hostel. Even without it he was soon panting for breath and boiling hot from the inside out. Above his gasping, the footsteps chasing him

sounded very loud.

Then, without warning, the footsteps ceased. He looked over his shoulder to see what had happened.

He ran headlong into something and rebounded as though off a wall. Someone had stepped out in front of him. Big hands pushed him the rest of the way to the ground. He glimpsed white hair before falling on his back. Someone laughed as he scrambled to his knees, spitting sand.

“Hey there, stone-boy.” The albino loomed over him, an unusual and threatening figure dressed in cut-off shorts and gray cotton smock. He was missing a tooth, the gap visible inside his mouth as he leered down at Sal. “Where are you going in such a hurry?”

“My father—” Sal gasped.

“What about him?”

“I was just—”

“Running to him like a baby?”

“No, I—”

“So what’s the problem?”

The albino picked him up by the shirt-front, then threw him down again. Sal’s bottle of water spilled open, staining the sand gray. Behind him, someone laughed. Great, Sal thought. An audience was all he needed. But there always was one. People like the albino thrived on them.

“Where you from, stone-boy? This must seem pretty dull compared with your big cities. Maybe we should liven things up for you. Eh? Would you like that?”

Sal never knew whether to stay quiet or talk. Pleading to be left alone only confirmed that the bullies had the upper hand.

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Halfway to his feet again, he tried to be amiable. “I like it enough as it is, thanks.”

The albino leaned into his face. “You like it here? Really?”

“Yes.” Sal was standing now, and dusting himself down without taking his eyes off his opponent.

“Then why wouldn’t you talk to me before? Aren’t I posh enough for you? Is that it?”

“No, of course not—”

“Good, because we don’t like strangers coming here and telling us they’re better than we are. That makes us annoyed.”

The albino nodded to someone over Sal’s shoulder, who tripped Sal from behind.

“Really annoyed.”

More laughter from the albino’s cronies, one of them a girl. Sal clenched his fists and closed his eyes. A single deep breath, then he would spring to his feet and retaliate as best he could. He’d be pounded into the sand for sure, but at least he would go down fighting.

“Haven’t you lot got anything better to do?”

The voice took everyone by surprise. Sal froze on the verge of moving.

“This is none of your business, old man,” said the albino to someone Sal couldn’t see.

“I think that’s for me to decide.”

“I think you should keep moving and let us get on with what we’re doing.”

“Do you think *he* agrees?”

Sal didn’t dare look up but knew the man was talking about him.

The albino's voice was thick with venom. "I think *he* knows when to keep quiet."

"I see. Well, perhaps we should ask the Selector, see what *she* thinks. I bet she won't take kindly to reports of bullying, or dodging chores."

"You wouldn't dare—"

"Bet your life on it?"

It was the albino's turn to back down, and Sal could tell he hated it from the snarl in his voice.

"Fine. Stick up for your own kind."

"How ironic coming from you. Your skin is paler than his."

The albino drew breath sharply. "I'm warning you, old man—"

"You don't frighten me, boy. And your dad doesn't frighten me either. Do send my regards next time you see him, won't you?"

The albino spat into the ground by Sal's hand, then moved away. Sal watched his big feet recede with intense relief; he'd been expecting a parting kick for sure.

"That's better." The man's voice came closer.

Sal checked that the albino had definitely left. He saw three boys and one girl, all, except the albino, with black hair and deep-dark skin, strolling away down the road—determinedly nonchalant, as though nothing had happened. None of them was the bilby-faced boy, the only other person Sal would have recognized.

Then a hand was thrust at him from above, and he found himself staring into the strangest face he had ever seen.

The old man had skin that had been weathered dark

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brown. Strands of straggly gray hair poked out the back of a very old cap. Pale gold ear-rings hung from the high points of both ears, which stuck out firmly as though on constant alert. His eyes were slate-gray. The man's oddest features were his tattoos: tight-wound spirals on his temples; circles on either side of his nose, like an extra set of eyes; and an up-pointed triangle on his chin. All had been executed in black ink on his dark skin, and were very fine work, probably the finest Sal had seen in all his travels.

Tattoos were mainly an Interior thing, like pale skin. They were as uncommon on the Strand as willy-willies. The only other person he knew who had one nearly as good, if not as intricate, was his father. It was much smaller, a green cross on the back of his father's left hand.

"Are you still with us, boy?" the man asked, his voice amused and light.

"I—I'm sorry," Sal stammered. Thinking, *so much for staying out of trouble*, he raised a hand and let himself be helped up.

The old man indicated the four teenagers receding into the distance. "They're not bad kids, really," the old man said. "Just bored. Every year I pray the Selector will take the bright ones away before bad apples like Kemp can spoil them forever. If there is a Goddess, I hope she's listening."

Sal suddenly found those gray eyes back on him.

"Eh? Are *you* listening?"

"Oh, um. Thank you." Sal still didn't know what to say beyond that. His benefactor wore a rough sackcloth vest and cotton pants, with leather sandals on his feet. He stood an inch or two higher than Sal, looked at least five times Sal's age, and radiated an indefinable energy. Sal had never

met anyone quite like him.

“You don’t talk much,” said the man, nodding. “You’re too busy observing. That’s good. Still, come say hello to Shilly. She’s my apprentice, just over here.”

The old man’s hand descended on one shoulder and gripped it tight. Sal couldn’t have pulled free if he’d wanted to.

Shilly was a girl smaller than him, although he could tell she was slightly older, crouched by the side of the road and doodling in the sand with a twig. She didn’t seem to have noticed the incident, or was prepared to ignore it. Sal was intensely grateful for that.

“Shilly, this is—what’s your name, boy?”

The girl looked up expectantly. Her face was small and heart-shaped with high cheeks. Her muddy brown hair, bleached at the tips by the sun and held back in a ponytail by a thick brass band, looked like it hadn’t been washed for weeks. She wore a simple blue dress that was slightly tattered around the hem. Her feet were bare.

Her eyes were the most intense green he had ever seen.

“Sal,” he managed.

“Hello, Sal.” Her voice was firm, almost challenging. Her dark toes dug into the sand beneath her, and she stood. “*Are you from the dry lands?*”

“Of course he isn’t,” said the man, waving dismissively. “You’re no stone-boy, are you, Sal? Even though you have your family’s eyes.”

“I do?”

“Of course. As clear as glass. Only fools like Kemp—and the Goddess knows there are too many of them in this world—will not see what *their* eyes show them. You take

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after your mother, I'll wager."

Something in Sal fluttered. "What do you know about my mother?"

"I didn't say I knew anything." The old man sighed and touched a pendant around his neck. "There's a storm coming."

Sal glanced up at the blue sky, thrown off by the sudden change in subject. An unruly flock of seagulls tumbled in the air above them. "Doesn't look like it to me."

Still fingering the pendant, the old man said, "Tash says so, and Tash is never wrong. You have somewhere to stay?"

Sal nodded.

"Good. You'll need it. The weather here can be fierce when it wants, like the locals. You need to be careful." He raised an arm and gestured for the girl to join him. "Come along, Shilly."

"You're going? But—"

"We have work to do down at the market. Shilly and I were on our way there when we noticed you needed help, and we were already late."

"Bye." The girl smiled at him over her shoulder, the light tips of her hair dancing on her shoulders. "Watch out for the scabs!"

Sal didn't know what she meant, but knew he owed the old man for helping him. "Thank you!" he called again as they walked away.

The girl winked, then turned to watch where she was going. The old man said nothing.

Left feeling scattered by both encounters, Sal stood in the middle of the road for a long moment. Something about the old man and his apprentice made him curious;

the hints about his mother and Shilly's knowing smile in particular. He considered following them to see what they did at the market, or maybe asking Josip about them. But following them could get him in more trouble, while asking the mechanic would mean explaining what had happened with Kemp. He would be embarrassed if his father found out from the mechanic rather than from himself. Besides, asking questions would be difficult when he hadn't been told the old man's name.

He turned to continue north up the hill to the mechanic's workshop. He hadn't gone far when markings in the sand where the girl had been squatting caught his eye. She had been doodling, he remembered. Stepping across the road to take a closer look, he found himself staring at himself—a sketch that managed in only a few lines to sum him up perfectly. It was uncanny; she had captured him after only a minute or two's study.

The portrait was winking at him. Underneath, in simple block characters she'd written:

MIDNIGHT

Only then did he realize that Shilly's hair color matched that of the first person he had glimpsed hiding behind the wall back on the other road. She and the old man had been following him before Kemp and his darker-skinned friends had attacked. The two of them hadn't stumbled upon him by chance at all.

Fundelry was getting weirder by the second.

Footsteps behind him made him jump. He turned, thinking that Kemp and the others had come back.

But when he turned all he saw was his father walking back into town with a broad smile on his tan-skinned face.

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“Hey, Sal. I’ve been working!”

Sal felt a shiver of relief that he wouldn’t have to fight anyone. “That’s fantastic, Dad.”

“It’s certainly welcome. What are you doing here? Still exploring?”

“Kind of.”

“Find anything interesting?”

Sal opened his mouth, then shut it. He had fully intended to explain what had happened to him, but a fear of getting into trouble stopped him now the chance had arrived. His actions might not have brought a platoon of Sky Wardens down upon them, but they had certainly attracted a degree of unwanted attention. He was uncertain enough of his footing in Fundelry without getting his father offside as well.

“Not really,” he said, erasing both the portrait and the message from the sand with a slight movement of one foot, wishing the entire incident could be as easily erased.

“Good,” his father said, putting an arm around his shoulders and pulling him close. “Let’s go back to Von’s and get a proper meal in our bellies. My shout, eh.”

“Sounds great,” Sal said, letting himself be tugged along. It would be a definite relief to escape Fundelry for a while.

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*The lines quoted in Chapter 11 are taken from the poem
“A Dream Within A Dream” by Edgar Allan Poe.*

In a world...

where the huge, red-sanded deserts are ruled by Stone Mages and the vast coastlines by Sky Wardens, any child with magic ability is taken away to the Haunted City to be trained in the Change.

Fundelry is a small town much like any other in the Strand. The people have little tolerance for anyone who stands out, and Sal and his father are strangers, running from someone ... or something. Sal is rescued from the local bully by Shilly and her teacher Lodo, a mysterious tattooed man who seems to know more about Sal than Sal himself. And, strangely, Sal's father seems to want to stay put for a while.

But soon the Sky Wardens will come to Fundelry — before then Sal must uncover the connection between Lodo and the mother he never met, in order to escape a fate that seems to have been chosen for him before he was even born ...



'An alchemical blend of elemental magic, tragic romance and the coming of age of a young boy who is yet to come into his own power which exists, poised between *Earthsea* and *Mad Max*, where the magic of fantasy meets the wonder of science fiction.' —*LOCUS*

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