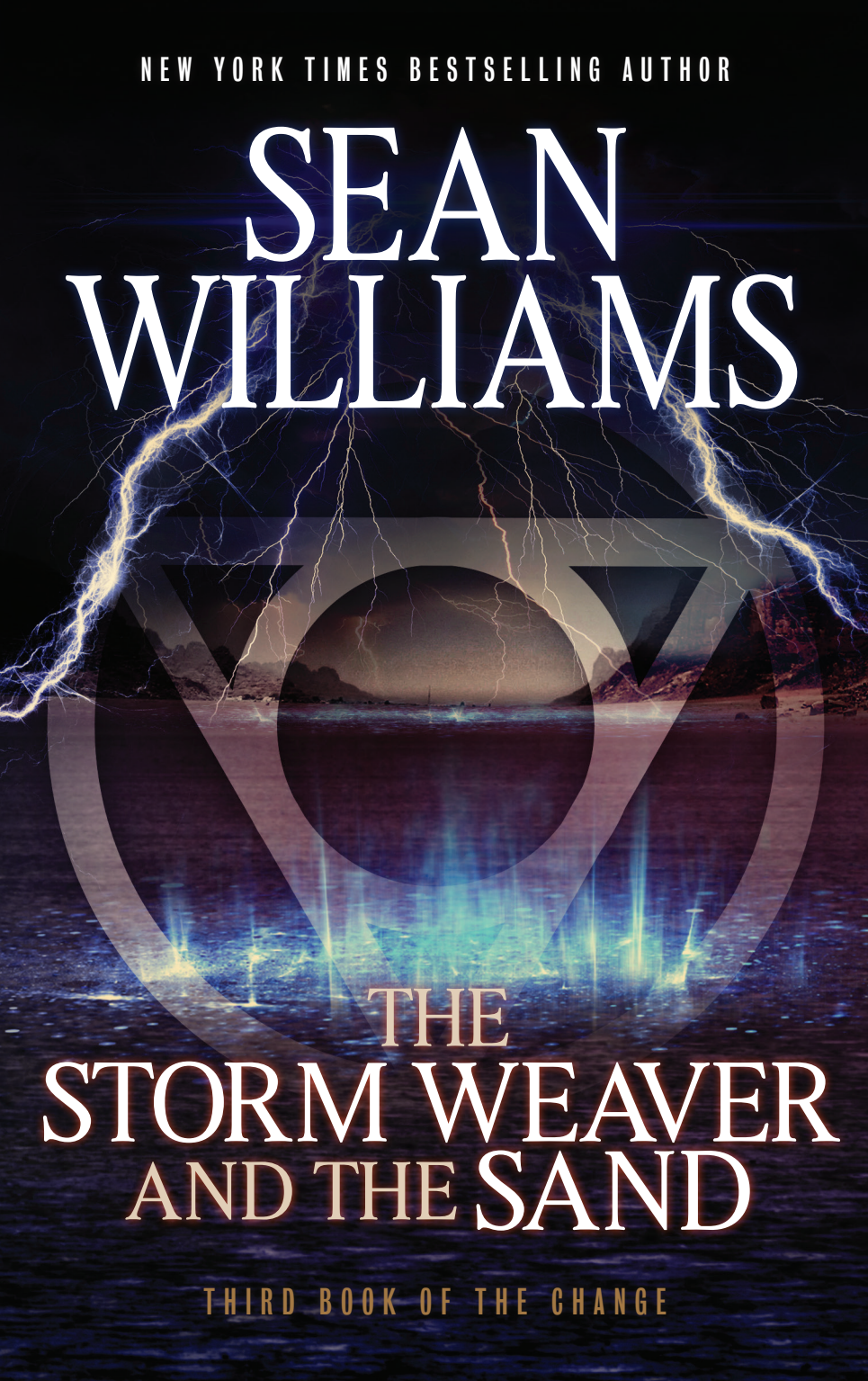


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SEAN  
WILLIAMS



THE  
STORM WEAVER  
AND THE SAND

THIRD BOOK OF THE CHANGE

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 **brio**  
BOOKS

CHAPTER I  
A Bad Beginning



*The storm was coming.*  
*Far away — across the sea and the sand, across the scrub along the coast and the fields inland, across the Ruins and the settlements, and the many places where humanity had failed to retain their claim upon the earth — from beyond the Divide, with its dark watchers and restless shadows, along age-worn valleys and flattened hills, out of the depths of the desert where it was called, the storm gathered speed and power and swept unchecked from the north. Like a living thing, a creature of untameable will, it rolled on its thunderous belly across the land, scouring hills bare with its furious winds, stabbing tongues of lightning at anything daring to stand upright, smothering all thoughts of resistance beneath the weight of its shadow. In its wake it left a trail of destruction.*

*It was coming. It couldn't be turned back. Indefatigable, unstoppable, relentless, its purpose was simple and its*

*destination plain.*

*The storm was coming for its maker.*

—

Sal jerked awake with a gasp. The storm! It was coming for him! He had woken it from its rest in the dry wastelands surrounding the Nine Stars. They had to get away before it reached the caravan ...

He blinked.

A cursory glance at his surroundings revealed that he was no longer in the caravan at all. He was sleeping on a real bed, clutching thin sheets in his fists and surrounded by stone walls. There was a single, wide air vent with a metal grille across it in the high ceiling, and the floors were made of polished wood. A mirror glowed on one wall, as though reflecting starlight, buzzing faintly with the Change. Under that silver glow he had fallen asleep almost as soon as his head had hit the pillow.

It came back to him in a rush: his arrival in the Haunted City in the middle of the night, full of dread at what awaited him. This was the place where his parents had met, but he harboured no sentimental thoughts concerning that. It was also the place where his mother died and where his real father lived. The thought of meeting Highson Sparre — a man he knew nothing about except that he had hunted his wife across the Strand, stolen her away from her lover and child, and imprisoned her against her will so she died of a broken heart — sent waves of apprehension through Sal's body.

The Syndic, his great-aunt, had him in her clutches now.

## The Storm Weaver and the Sand

He might have felt relieved that she had not been at the dock to greet him had he not been so weak from seasickness at the time. Her absence only delayed the inevitable.

He had been imprisoned the moment the solid door of the room had shut behind him as surely as though he'd been thrown into a cell. Not that he had felt free at any point during the long journey from Ulum. The band around his left wrist took care of that.

Sweat cooled on his skin, making him shiver. He forced his hands to loosen their grip on the sheets, still feeling the fury of the storm in his dream, the single-minded determination of it as it roared across the parched land. Three times in the last week, he had had the nightmare. If that meant anything, he couldn't work out what it was. Why should he be afraid of something coming out of the Interior, out of the past, when what lay ahead of him was far worse? It was reality he should be worrying over in his sleep, not dreams.

He tried to go back to sleep, but even though he was exhausted his thoughts wouldn't let him. It felt weird after such a long journey to be at his destination. The last stage had been a harrowing one as the bone ship, *Os*, had ferried them, and the caravan from the coast town of Gunida, to the island of the Haunted City. The sea had been choppy and Sal had spent most of the voyage leaning over the edge, throwing up. Riding the surface of the ocean being tossed up and down by the slightest wave was worse than he could have possibly imagined.

His initial impressions of the city were, therefore, far from positive. He'd glimpsed it, woozily, on the horizon at sunset, silhouetted against an orange-blue sky. Its towers shone faintly green in the fading light, glinting like a giant

quartz crystal balanced on the edge of the world. Its countless towers sprouted from a bare, kidney-shaped island that bulged upward at the end pointing away from the mainland of the Strand. Steep, forbidding cliff faces held back the sea on all sides, except where the incessant pounding of waves had hollowed out caves and blowholes that hung open like giant mouths, their teeth hidden just below the waterline.

It was through one such cavern that *O's* passed. Within lay a magnificent dock, ready for the new arrivals. A small party of stern-faced Sky Wardens had waited patiently for them to disembark. While the wardens whisked him and his friends up a series of ramps and into the city, the caravan leader, Belilanca Brokate, remained behind to oversee the unloading of camels and wagons. She caught his eye as they ascended the first leg, and waved cheerfully. It didn't look like a farewell, but Sal knew it could well be. He might never escape.

Sal lay down in the dark, his mind filled with foreboding. Staring into the void of the future was worse, in its way, than staring into the black emptiness of the sea. Who knew what would come out at him from the darkness ahead? He didn't know, but he was working on it, trying to work out what to do next.

*Behind every powerful solution, the Mage Van Haasteren had said, there lies a powerful need.*

His need had never been greater. If there was one thing he had learned —

“Sal?”

He stopped in mid-thought, certain that someone had whispered his name. It wasn't possible, though. The walls were too thick. The door had locked solidly behind him the

moment it had closed, and there was no one in the room except him.

*A ghost?* he thought, somewhat nervously. That couldn't be true either — but what else did he expect in the Haunted City?

“Sal!” The whisper came again, unmistakable this time. Its source was above him. “Sal, it's me!”

“Skender?” Sal sat up, eyes bugging at the air vent. Two small fingers were wiggling at him through holes in the metal grille. “What —? How —?”

“Hang on.” More fingers appeared and curled around the grille. There was a soft click. With a shower of dust, the grille lifted up and away. Skender's face appeared in its place, dirty but grinning from ear to ear.

“Surprise!”

“What are you doing up there?” Sal whispered.

“Exploring. What else would I be doing?”

“But —” The response, *You could get into trouble*, was obviously not going to make a difference. Skender's exploration of the ancient spaces of the Keep had taken place with a similar lack of concern for the rules. “Aren't you tired?”

“Exhausted, but there was no way I could sleep. We're in the Haunted City, Sal. Think about it!”

“I am thinking about it.”

“Too much, probably.”

“I don't suppose you've found a way out yet, have you?”

“Not yet.” Skender's eyes gleamed. “Want to help me try?”

Sal shook his head.

“Are you sure?”

He nodded, even though saying it betrayed every instinct in his body. “Maybe another night. When we’ve settled in and they won’t be watching us so closely.”

“Your loss. It’s great up here, Sal. You can go anywhere. Who knows what I’ll find?”

Sal smiled at the boy’s smudged features. “A lot of dirt, by the look of it.”

“Pfft.” Skender waved in dismissal. “Okay, I can take a hint. I’ll let you know if I find anything useful.”

“What about Shilly? Have you found her yet?”

“She’s a couple of corridors across, out like a light.”

Sal had known that she wasn’t far away: the part of him that sensed when she was near had been tingling deep in his chest ever since he had been locked in. It was good, though, to hear that Shilly was safe and able to rest. “Has anyone come to see you, to welcome you?”

“Not a soul. Some reception, eh?”

“At least the Syndic’s going to let us catch up on our sleep before she does whatever it is she intends to do with us.”

“Sure. You’ll probably get a last meal as well.” Skender’s grin was undentable. “Lighten up, Sal. And remember what we decided. They think they’ve worked us out. If we give them what they expect to see, we’ll have a better chance of surprising them later on.”

Sal nodded. This was Shilly’s idea, and he could see the logic in it. The wardens knew only so much about the three of them: that Shilly had shown some interest in learning at the Haunted City; that Skender had stowed away on the caravan to see more of the world; and that Sal was firmly resisting any attempt to take him back to the Strand. The



## The Storm Weaver and the Sand

wardens would, therefore, expect Sal to be the troublemaker and Shilly to do as she was told. Skender, Shilly reasoned, wouldn't be regarded as a threat at all. They could use such assumptions against the wardens if the chance arose.

A troublemaker, a tourist, and a try-hard. It wasn't much of an army to take on the might of the Sky Wardens, but it would have to do. If he was going to escape from the clutches of the Syndic and his real father, he had to take every advantage he could.

"Can I go now?" asked Skender.

"Sorry. Feel free," he replied. "Just remember to get some rest. We'll need to be alert for tomorrow."

"Don't worry, Sal. I've got plenty of time. We've only been here an hour or so."

Sal groaned inside. That left the rest of the night ahead. Sleepless, probably.

"Thanks for dropping in," he said with a weary smile.

"My pleasure." Skender winked as the grille dropped back into place. "It was worth it just to see the look on your face."

Skender retreated from the vent and turned back the way he had come. The narrow gaps above the ceilings were cramped and warm, and smelt of the dust of ages. The close proximity of the rooms to each other made noise a constant concern. And the crawlspaces wouldn't be a good place to hide, either, if he was discovered.

Still, he decided, it was well worth the effort. After the long and uncomfortable journey south, he was in an entirely new place — one as far away from his home as he could imagine. Who knew what he would see during his nocturnal explorations?

Slowly and carefully, he peeked into three more rooms. They weren't lit, and he could hear no sound of breathing. That wasn't encouraging, but was fairly typical of what he had found thus far. Shilly and Sal's rooms were the only two inhabited quarters that he had come across. He didn't let that dampen his enthusiasm, though. Each room held a wealth of potential discoveries; if he didn't look, he would never find.

This, he told himself, was the life.

He crawled at random from vent to vent, never once concerned that he would lose his way. He had memorised every centimetre of the route, just as he had unconsciously memorised the pattern cast by light through the vents around him, the expression on Salface, the smell of the dust in his nose — everything, in fact, that he had seen and sensed that day. The memories crowded his mind like a roomful of people, jostling his thoughts and distracting him from serious contemplation. The only way to be rid of them, he had learned, was to find new things to distract himself with, to prevent the wash of associations that came with each familiar sensation. When every moment he had ever experienced could be recalled as clearly as the present, the weight of the past soon began to overwhelm the brief flicker called “now”.

Sleep helped. Sometimes after a good, long rest he awoke feeling almost calm, as though his mind had reorganised itself overnight, putting everything back into place and steeling itself against the mad clamour of the day. Mornings like that were to be treasured and encouraged. His memory was always perfect, but there were different ways of remembering, some better than others: memories

could come unbidden or in response to a trigger; he could seek them deliberately or let them wash over him, uncontrolled. That was what it boiled down to; or so his father said. He had to learn how to control his gift, or it would become a curse. As well as Stone Mage teachers, there were numerous lunatics and renegades among his ancestors. An only child, he didn't want the last Van Haasteren to let the side down.

He was being careful. And when he wasn't being careful, at least he was having fun. In the past month, he had seen more things than he had in all the years previously. He had seen the full moon hanging frozen over the Nine Stars during the Stone Mage Synod and soon, in just two days, he would see the full moon rise again over the Haunted City, home of the Sky Wardens. He had sailed across the sea in a boat made of bone. Even in his wildest dreams, he had never hoped to see so much: for the rest of his days, the memory of every sight would be fresh and vivid. Travelling with Sal and Shilly was the adventure of his lifetime, and he knew it. He wasn't going to miss out on anything.

Something crunched under his open palm. He looked down and found a fine powder where the brittle bones of a mouse or bird had lain for centuries, perhaps, before he had crushed them. He didn't flinch; he was well used to such things from his exploration of the ancient spaces of the cliff-city in which he had grown up. It was a small price to pay.

Two more rooms, also empty. *So much for treasure*, he thought, his enthusiasm beginning to wane. Perhaps it was time to start heading back to his room. Sal was right about getting some sleep. He could *almost* feel himself getting

tired — if he really tried.

Halfway to the open vent leading to his room, he stopped. Just within earshot he made out a low mumble of voices. Wondering who could be up so late at night — apart from himself — he slithered in the direction it came from. Two rooms along, a bright, silver light shone up through a vent into the dusty crawlspace. Lying flat on his stomach, he peered carefully down through the vent, but could see only the tops of heads, one pitch black, the other white.

Two voices floated up to him.

“— thought they would have contacted us by now,” one was saying. Strong to the point of overbearing and sharp as a whip, it belonged to Radi Mierlo, Sal’s maternal grandmother, the woman who had lied to and manipulated Sal in an effort to get him to return to the Strand. “If, as you say, they wanted us here so badly, why haven’t they given us any sort of welcome?”

“It’s not us they want,” replied a voice, so thick with bitterness that Skender could picture Shom Behenna’s sneer perfectly. The ex-warden had rarely spoken to them on the caravan journey, but when he did he made no attempt to hide his feelings over the fall from grace he had suffered at Sal’s hands. By allowing himself to be tricked into breaking his vows, Behenna had been publicly humiliated at the Synod a month ago, and was likely to be punished by his former superiors now that he had returned to the Haunted City. “They want the children.”

“So you say, Shom, but they can’t have one without the other. Without you, without me, none of this would have happened. They’d still be looking for Sal and Shilly right now. They owe us.”

“They *own* us,” Behenna corrected her. “Question them all you like, but they’ll do what they want.”

“I would question them, if they’d only talk to us.”

“They’ll come when they are ready, and not before.”

“Yes, yes. I see the picture quite clearly, except for one thing. How do you know all this? In all the time you’ve been with us, in all the time you were chasing Sal, did they talk to you even once? How can you speak with any authority about your mysterious masters?”

There was a small silence. Skender held his breath, terrified of making the slightest sound that might alert them to his presence above them.

“They told me to get the children,” Behenna said in a grating voice that rose in tone as though he was daring her to defy him, to tell him he was wrong. “They told me to get the children, no matter what it took, and to bring them back to the Haunted City. I’ve done exactly that. I’ve done what they told me to do. They knew they could trust me, and I’ve proved them right.”

“But would you have been so willing if you’d known what it would cost? That you’d find yourself before a disciplinary hearing as a result? I wonder. I suppose you’re expecting a reward for your efforts; a pardon, perhaps. That’s why you have such blind faith in their trustworthiness: because it’s the only hope you have that you will come out of this clean.” Sal’s grandmother snorted. “Well, if the Mierlo family has learned one thing, it’s not to put our trust in anyone — blindly or otherwise. I’ve made my own arrangements. Highson will be waiting for us when things begin. I’d rather place my bets on a man I can see and touch than on a phantom, any day.”

“The Weavers are not phantoms.”

“No? How can you be so sure — here of all places?” She stifled a yawn. “Your hearing is in a matter of days. If the Weavers don’t appear by then, I suppose you’ll know exactly where you stand. For now, Shom, I suggest we get some rest. We’ll need all our strength for tomorrow, no matter what happens.”

The black-haired, black-skinned man grunted and headed for the door. He took with him a cloud of tension that seemed almost palpable.

Radi Mierlo watched him go, then moved across the room to lie on the bed. Her eyes glittered in the faint light, staring at the ceiling.

“*The Weavers are not to be taken lightly,*” said a new voice, rasping and metallic.

“Be quiet, Mawson. Until I address you directly, I don’t want you to say another word.”

Skender peered more closely through the vent and made out the marble shape of the stone bust called Mawson sitting on the floor in one corner, near Radi Mierlo’s many trunks of belongings. Now that he knew to look for him, the man’kin’s presence was obvious.

This animated head and chest of a man who may never have lived, yet existed so deeply in the Change that he saw things no human could see, had travelled with them all the way from Ulum with the rest of the Mierlos’ possessions. Bound to Sal’s grandmother by some sort of life-debt, the man’kin had no choice but to obey her every request, although Skender had seen Mawson bend the rules when he wanted to. The man’kin didn’t like telling stories, either. Hoping to liven up the trip south, Skender had tried many

times to get him to talk about the things he must have seen in his long, unnatural life, but he had remained tight-lipped. *“Man’kin do not tell stories,”* Mawson told him. *“There are too many endings and too many beginnings. The only thing we can be certain of is the now.”*

Skender had no idea what that meant.

Complete silence indicated that Mawson was obeying the latest instruction from the woman who owned him. That was a shame, Skender thought, for he would have liked to learn more about the Weavers, those mysterious people who Sal suspected had a hand in Sal and Shilly’s enforced return to the Strand.

*“The Weavers are not to be taken lightly,”* Mawson repeated.

Skender almost jumped in shock; it had sounded as though the man’kin was whispering right into his ear. He froze, waiting for Radi Mierlo to berate Mawson for disobeying her instruction, but she didn’t stir. In fact, her eyes had closed. She looked like she was going to sleep.

*“Are you talking to me, Mawson?”* he sent to the man’kin through the Change.

The stone bust looked up at the vent and nodded, once.

Skender thought fast. So much for going unnoticed. The man’kin must have picked him out from the many minds surrounding it, using the Change. He had known he was there all along.

But Mawson hadn’t opposed him. He could have informed his mistress that there was an eavesdropper at any time during her conversation with Behenna, and Skender supposed that would have been the right thing to do. Instead, the man’kin had stayed silent. Why? So it could

make sure Skender got the point about the Weavers? Was it trying to tell him that, not Radi Mierlo?

There was another explanation.

“*You can’t talk to me, can you?*” he silently asked the man’kin.

Mawson solemnly shook his head.

That explained it. *Until I address you directly*, Radi Mierlo had told the man’kin, *I don’t want you to say another word*. All Mawson could say until freed from her instruction was the one string of words he had already uttered.

“*The Weavers —*”

“*Yeah, yeah. I know. They’re not to be trusted. And how frustrating for you.*” Skender smiled at the bust’s predicament. “*Whatever you’re trying to tell me, it’ll have to wait.*”

The man’kin’s gaze drifted away, as though tired of the conversation.

*All right*, Skender thought. *I can take a hint.*

He slithered through the crawlspace to the vent over his room. If Mawson had spotted him so easily, someone or something else might too, and the last thing Skender wanted to do was ruin his chances to explore by being caught.

He scrambled like a rat down the crude ladder he had made out of his cupboard and a chair. As he quietly rearranged the furniture, his mind turned over everything he had learned during his exploration. Shilly and Sal were both nearby, which was reassuring. Everyone was keen on keeping those two together, although he still hadn’t worked out why. Even his father, Skender Van Haasteren the Ninth, had thought the same. This Skender would figure it out, or he wouldn’t feel worthy of being the tenth in his line.



As for the rest ... Behenna thought he was working for the Weavers. Radi Mierlo was in contact with Highson Sparre, Sal's natural father. Plans within plans within plans — and he was sure they weren't the only people in the Haunted City plotting and scheming how best to use the new arrivals to their advantage. Whatever the next day brought, he felt safe assuming that it wouldn't go as either Shom Behenna or Radi Mierlo expected.

Shilly was startled out of restless sleep by a rapping on her door. She climbed awkwardly out of bed, still dressed in her travel clothes, and was told by a black-robed and hooded man that her presence was required before an examining committee.

“Examining what?” she protested, trying futilely to wake up properly. To her sleepy eyes, the mirror-like glass light hanging on one wall seemed much brighter than it had the previous night.

“Your fitness for the Novitiate,” he replied. Three people had come to wake her, all identically dressed, but he was the only one who spoke. His voice was deep and commanding, as though used to having orders obeyed.

“I don't know anything about a Novitiate,” she responded. “Who says I'm interested in joining?”

“That's what you're here to find out,” said the attendant.

Shrugging to conceal her nervousness, Shilly slipped her crutch into its well-worn place under her armpit and followed them out of the room. The attendants took her along narrow, rectangular corridors lined with arches. The arches had been filled in with bricks, so what might once have been a pleasant thoroughfare was now a narrow tunnel. She didn't know where they were going; she didn't know why

she was being taken there. All she could do was hope that she would wake up in time to make sense of things when she arrived.

*Don't be afraid to follow your heart.* The words of the elderly Mage Erentaite were of some comfort. *It's a journey we all must take, if only once in our lives.* Shilly knew that the decisions she had made and the allegiances she had chosen were right — or the closest to right she could discern at that time — but her leg still ached with a dull throb she suspected she would have for the rest of her life. Every step sent a dagger of pain up her hipbone and into the base of her skull, reminding her that even being right could be costly. The hooded attendants walked briskly, seemingly ignorant of her handicap, and she refused to say anything, to admit any weakness in front of them.

Deep down, she feared that the time of reckoning had come. She had been dreading this moment ever since the caravan had left Ulum, weeks before; ever since she had made the decision that had brought them hundreds of kilometres from the Nine Stars to the Haunted City. Her fate had been sealed the moment she had told the Synod that she wasn't certain that staying in the Interior was the right thing to do. Although Shom Behenna had tricked her into it, and part of her had never really believed that the consequences of her mistake would catch up with her, they were about to. She was sure of it. There would be no hiding what she was from the Sky Wardens.

A crippled, untalented girl. *Dead wood.*

All dreams of rescuing Lodo and learning how to use the Change would have to be forgotten if she couldn't show the Sky Wardens otherwise. Her life might as well be over.

It was up to her to ensure that it wasn't. *Troublemaker, tourist, try-hard.*

They came to an open door twice as high as the attendant leading the way. It hung open, and she heard voices echoing from the chamber within. A woman was addressing someone, and Shilly's heart beat fast at the thought that it might be the Syndic. But the voice wasn't the same: Nu Zanshin wasn't so velvety. She wore her strength on her sleeve.

"— won't be long now, I'm sure," the woman was saying as Shilly was led into the room. "Ah, here she is now. Does that address your concern, Sal?"

Shilly took in the scene at a glance. The room was cavernous and gloomy, with pillars and alcoves alternating around the walls, creating numerous opportunities for shadow. There were no windows, just a silver brazier on a wooden stand in the centre of the room, casting a steady, blue light. Sal and Skender were seated on two low stools before a tall, emaciated woman dressed entirely in black. Even inside she wore a wide-brimmed hat that hugged the skull. Her face was shadowed but not hidden in the same way as the attendants bringing Shilly to the examination, and her features were a surprise: sharply defined, inhumanly gaunt. Her skin was so pale, Shilly could see veins through it. Shilly had become somewhat accustomed to paler features after her journey through the Interior, but this woman was even whiter than Skender.

Beyond the woman, the room contained only hooded attendants standing in the alcoves, lining the walls like sentries, faceless and motionless. Despite the eerie threat they conveyed, Shilly breathed a sigh of relief. No sign of

the Syndic. Not yet, anyway.

“Yes, it does. Thank you,” said Sal. He looked as relieved to see Shilly as she was to see him, and just as exhausted; he had clearly been dragged out of bed still in his old clothes as she had. Skender was even filthier than he had been the night before, but was fairly vibrating with eagerness. After shooting Shilly a quick wave, his attention was back on the skeleton-thin woman before them.

“The Novitiate is like a school, right? Where you train your students?” the boy asked as Shilly was shown to the seat next to Sal. She wasn’t given the option to decline.

The woman tilted her head in assent. Her voice rolled over them like an orator’s. “To the Novitiate is given the task of training Sky Wardens. I am Master Warden Atilde. It is my purpose to examine every applicant upon arrival to see if the Selectors have correctly assessed their abilities. This includes you. You are behind by some weeks, and although I have been told that you have received some education at the Interior school known as the Keep, you must understand that this in no way guarantees that you will pass my examination. Our standards here are quite different.”

“But we didn’t apply to join the Novitiate,” Sal said. “What if we don’t want to be tested?”

“You are here now, and I will not have you wasting your talent. I made that very clear when I heard you were coming. Who you are means nothing to me; it’s what I can make of you that matters.” Master Warden Atilde’s eyes glittered oddly in their sockets, and a chill went down Shilly’s spine when she realised why. The woman’s eyes were translucent, as if made of glass — but with no attempt to

disguise them as real eyes. Atilde had to be as blind as the Mage Erentaite — yet was, impossibly, just as able to see. There was no question of who the woman was looking at: Sal, then Skender, and lastly, Shilly.

“Now you are all present,” Atilde said, “we can begin.” She raised her stick-thin arms as though trying to make herself look larger, like a lizard puffing itself up. Her black robes billowed around her. “The Change comes in many shapes and forms, but through us it can do only three things: it can promote our understanding of the world; it can imitate the appearance of the world; and it can alter the substance of the world. Theory, illusion and actuality — these are the foundation stones of all our teaching. A Sky Warden must master two of these three in order to graduate, and all must have more than a passing familiarity with the third. The exercises I am about to give you will determine how far advanced each of you is along these three roads.

“Shilly first.” With a series of sweeping gestures, the warden drew a design out of glowing lines in thin air. It looked like a star made from smaller stars and turned slowly clockwise once complete. “Can you tell me what effect this visualisation would have on the world?”

Shilly studied it closely, wanting to impress even though she resented the way their desires had been so casually dismissed. Her part was easy to play.

The design reminded her of one that Lodo had shown her a long time ago, one of a number that both Stone Mages and Sky Wardens could use.

“It freezes water,” she said.

“Could you demonstrate for us?”

Atilde gestured. One of the attendants came forward with a glass of water and handed it to Shilly. She stared at it for a moment, thinking, *Now what do I do?* She had no talent; all the knowledge in the world couldn't help her turn even a thimbleful of water into anything else without a grain of ability to make it happen.

Then she felt a hand on her shoulder. A voice in her head whispered, "*Use me.*"

Shilly shook her head, knowing without needing to look who the hand and voice belonged to. She had sworn never again to Take from Sal after almost draining him dry in the Keep. She could have killed him, or worse.

"*You have to, Shilly. The wardens need to see what you can do. If things don't work out —*" Sal hesitated, "*— they're your best hope of getting what you want.*"

The bald statement flashed through her mind like a crack through glass. She wanted things as they had once been, with Lodo free and whole and teaching her to use the Change. Would the Sky Wardens give her that? Would Sal? She didn't know.

"*We agreed, remember?*"

And he *was* offering ...

She closed her eyes and reached through him for the Change. It stirred immediately at her command. The visualisation rotated smoothly in her mind, then poured through her, into the glass. With a soft crunching noise, like stepping on dead leaves, the water turned to slush then swelled into a solid block of ice. Cold blossomed in her fingertips.

Sal squeezed her shoulder and withdrew his hand.

"Well done, Shilly." Atilde's thin lips pursed in

something that might have been approval. The attendant who had given her the glass took it away. “For your last test, I want you to show me something important to you. An image from your past.” The gaunt figure approached with gloved, claw-like hands extended. Corded fingers gripped Shilly’s wrists in a surprisingly strong grip and pulled her to her feet. “Your friend will not assist you, this time.”

Shilly couldn’t look at the woman’s ravaged face. It was like staring too close at a jellyfish. She averted her eyes and struggled through a rising panic to think. She had to concentrate, focus on the task she had been given. She wouldn’t have Sal to help her, this time, and she had to impress Warden Atilde. Something from her past, yes: but what?

A glint of glass under Warden Atilde’s black robe caught her eye. It was a torc similar to the one Behenna had let her touch on the way to the Nine Stars. Atilde’s was full of swirling bubbles, frozen in the act of escaping. The way it hung around the warden’s neck reminded her of the charm Lodo had worn around his own neck: a thumb-sized carving in brown-grey stone, shaped like a blunt-featured child. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the memory, picturing it in her mind. Lodo had used the charm to predict the weather, saying that it could feel storms passing over the feet of distant mountains. When she touched it, it whispered words too faint to be understood. Lodo had been given the charm by Skender’s grandfather when he had studied at the Keep, and its name was —

“*Yadeh-tash.*” Atilde’s voice was approving. Shilly opened her eyes and saw an illusion of the charm floating in the air between them, as distinct as the real thing, but silent, dead.

It had no weight, no substance, and would dissipate into nothingness the moment she let the thought of it slip from her mind. Keeping it in place was like holding a butterfly between her hands. It wanted to fly away but was too fragile to break free. She liked the feeling of mastery it gave her. Maintaining the illusion required a delicate touch.

Her concentration shattered the moment Atilde's words sank in. "You know what *tash* is?" she asked, startled.

"Of course." The warden's translucent lips formed a faint smile as the illusion wavered and vanished. "I am expert in all aspects of the Change."

The thin hands released her. Shilly fell back onto her stool as though the muscles in her good leg had turned to water.

"Skender next." Atilde brushed past Sal to approach the boy on the far stool. Skender looked nervously up at the Master Warden as she loomed over him. Atilde took two steps backward and drew another design in the air.

"Explain," she said, indicating the intricate pattern of interlocking curves, each one a pronounced U. "Tell me what this does."

A look of dismay passed across Skender's face. "I don't know," he said. "I've never seen it before."

"I suspected as much. It's a Sky Warden visualisation, and you have been trained the Interior way. But the principles behind this are not dissimilar to some your father teaches. You should be able to work it out." Atilde gestured at the pattern again. It began to pulsate gently in and out, as though breathing.

Skender's dismay only deepened. Shilly wished she could send the answer to him through the Change. The



pattern influenced air movement in enclosed spaces, such as houses; it created breezes. Without the Change, though, she was mute; they might as well have been separated by walls a mile thick.

Skender shook his head. “I don’t know,” he repeated. “It makes water less salty?”

Atilde smiled thinly and gave him the correct answer. “Now,” she said, grasping Skender’s hands as she had Shilly’s, “make it work for me.”

The boy concentrated, drawing on the warden’s talent rather than his own, and managed to make a fitful breeze dance through the room. The wide brim of Atilde’s hat fluttered in front of her face.

“Thank you, Skender. Lastly, show me something precious from home. Demonstrate the third path of mastery.”

Skender’s brow furrowed. For a moment nothing happened, then far above them a shape moved across the shadowed ceiling. Shilly looked up into the face of one of the guardians protecting the Way between the Keep and Ulum — an enormous stone statue six metres high. Its face scowled down at her, then lifted up out of sight, and disappeared.

“Big is not necessarily better, young Van Haasteren,” Master Warden Atilde scolded.

“I wasn’t trying to show off,” he said, at least half-seriously, Shilly thought. “I didn’t know that you could create illusions of man’kin, and I wanted to give it a go. That’s all.”

“Why wouldn’t you be able to?”

“Because — well, you can’t create illusions of people because they have minds. Man’kin have minds, and I

assumed —”

“All living things have minds,” Atilde informed him, “but not all minds are the same. Animals have minds that exist entirely in the present, with little or no thought of tomorrow or yesterday. Humans travel from past to future in dynamic tension between both extremes; it is this motion that makes them difficult to recreate. Man’kin, on the other hand, see all things at once, hence their ability to foretell or reveal things that are not known to us.” Her face darkened. “There are other minds that see in yet different ways, and you may learn about them during your studies here — but that is a topic for another day. Suffice it to say that you should have guessed the illusion would work because Shilly showed us *yadeh-tash*. That charm and the man’kin are fundamentally the same, although they share no common origin.”

Satisfied that Skender had taken her point, Master Warden Atilde moved to her right to confront Sal.

“Last but not least,” she said to him, “it is your turn. Give me your left hand.”

Warily Sal obeyed, and with two swift movements she undid the charm around his wrist that he, Skender and Shilly had tried, many times, to remove on the way from Ulum. A seemingly simple band of plaited leather, it dug tight if Sal strayed too far from his grandmother without her permission. It also had an inhibitory effect on his use of the Change, although his talent was so great that nothing could contain it completely.

Atilde drew another charm in the air, a series of dots and lines with no apparent order.

“Tell me what this would do.”

Sal shook his head.

“You don’t know or you won’t tell me?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Does that mean I fail the examination?”

Atilde’s eyes narrowed. “This charm turns dust into fog. Show me how it works.”

“I can’t. I’m on the wrong side of the Divide.”

“You are a wild talent. That doesn’t stop you.”

“I thought the idea was to control wild talents, not encourage them.”

“The idea is to learn, boy, and you won’t learn unless you do as I say.” Atilde’s glassy stare locked with Sal’s for a long, strained moment.

Then he looked away. He stared hard at the pattern, and Shilly felt the Change flex through him, even from across the room. Instantly, every mote of dust in the room turned to a tiny drop of water. A thin mist hung in the air, glittering in the silver light, and moisture coated every surface.

“Very good,” Atilde started to say.

But Sal wasn’t done. The Change flexed again, and a sudden gale whipped through the room, sending the mist into a furious whirlwind. A third time the Change responded to Sal’s command, and every droplet of water suspended in the air turned to ice.

As the room filled with swirling snow, blinding her, Shilly felt a hand on her arm dragging her toward the door.

“Stop!” Atilde’s shout coincided with strong hands reaching out of the snowstorm and holding Shilly still. She felt Sal struggling beside her before his hand fell away. There was a sound like glass breaking in the distance, and suddenly the air was full of dust again.

Some went up her nose. She sneezed instantly.

“I see we’re going to have to keep our wits about us,” Atilde said, striding calmly across the room to where Sal was held by two attendants. The hood of one of them had fallen back, revealing a silver-haired, dark-skinned man with a severe expression. He held Sal tight as Atilde reattached the bracelet to Sal’s wrist, then he let go and replaced his hood.

“No further testing is required,” Warden Atilde said to all of them. “I judge you worthy of the Novitiate. Classes commence in two hours. You will be present, or your stay here will become decidedly less comfortable.”

“I don’t care about comfort —” Sal began.

“You should care.” The warden’s icy eyes flashed at him. “I’m the only thing standing between you and the Syndic. The Alcaide has seen to that. The fact that one of you is the son of an important Stone Mage grants you unique status, irrespective of what certain other parties want. This arrangement might not be permanent, but it could be, and it would be wise not to sink your ships before you’ve sailed them. If you want my advice, it would be to behave.”

Sal swallowed his protest with a visible effort. Atilde was right: it wouldn’t pay to cause too much trouble too quickly. Shilly wanted to ask why the Alcaide had sent them to the Novitiate — to help them or to hinder them — but there were too many things battling for her attention at once. She could only ask one thing at a time. And she had a role to play.

“You mean you’re going to let us study here?” she asked.

“Temporarily — at least until your situation is resolved. I know there are some ambiguities, but that’s not my

concern. My job is to ensure that you perform while you are in my care.” She briefly but pointedly fixed Sal with a stare.

“You will stand out,” she said, turning to pace, her gloved hands clasped lightly behind her back. “As I said, the term started weeks ago. People will wonder why you are special, to be allowed in so late. I will not tell them; that battle is for you to fight. My only advice to you is this: don’t turn your back on what you have been given. Each of you is strong, in your own way, and you should take the chance to learn how to use those strengths. To do otherwise would dishonour what you have — and some gifts can be taken away.”

She nodded to herself, as though confirming that she hadn’t forgotten anything.

“That’s all. Take them to see their new home.”

The attendants lining the wall closed in. Shilly didn’t resist as she, Sal and Skender were guided out of the room, leaving the unearthly, pale woman alone with the settling dust.

## CHAPTER 2

# In the Wilderness of Glass



“I don’t like the sound of this,” whispered Shilly as they were led away from their first meeting with Master Warden Atilde.

“Why not?” responded Skender, playing his part for the benefit of the attendants. “You wanted to be taught here. Your temperament matches the Strand. You’re back where you belong.”

“I don’t belong here,” she whispered, and Sal privately agreed. When he pictured Shilly, she was always as he had first met her: wild-haired and mysterious in the village of Fundelry, answerable only to Lodo. The Keep hadn’t suited her, and he doubted any Sky Warden school would either.

During their trip from Ulum, she had cut her hair short, hacking at her curly locks with a knife until all that was left was a wavy mane rising from her scalp. From certain angles and in certain lights she looked more than a little crazy.

He suspected that this had been her intention. The way she swung her crutch displayed a firm defiance, as though daring anyone to comment on her weakness.

“They’re trying to trap us,” she went on. “If we do as they say, we’ll be caught up in the system. Once they can claim they’re teaching us, it’ll be that much harder to make them let go. And they’ll claim credit for anything we do.”

“I think we should do as they say,” Sal said. “It’s not as if we have any other options.”

“Sense at last,” said one of the attendants accompanying them.

“For now,” Sal added, unsure which one had spoken, but scowling at the nearest anyway.

They came to a T-junction adorned with bright blue banners that had seen better days. The material was fraying around the edges, and the dye had faded unevenly, making the colour blotchy.

“Remember this intersection,” said another of the attendants, a woman, this time. “To your left are the rooms you slept in last night. You’ll keep those until your circumstances change. To the right are the common areas. Meals are served at regular times every day.”

Skender’s stomach gurgled on cue. “We’re going there now?”

“Yes. When you’ve eaten this morning, you will be shown to your various classes and introduced to your teachers. After lunch, you will be collected and taken elsewhere.”

“Where?” asked Shilly. “Collected by who?”

The attendant didn’t answer, indicating instead that they should take the right-hand passage. Temporarily resigned to his fate, Sal did as he was told. His token attempt to

escape had demonstrated the futility of trying while the wardens were watching him. He vowed to try again later, under more favourable conditions. That he would try again he was in no doubt. He wasn't going to stay captive in the hands of the people who had killed his mother and father any longer than he had to.

The right-hand corridor was much shorter and culminated in a hall that reminded Sal of the underground chambers of Ulum, large enough to hold several hundred people and filled with low tables and benches. The air was full of clanking cutlery, the warmth of so many bodies all in one space, and the smell of food. A throng of teenagers dressed in various shades of grey — students, he assumed — swarmed around the benches, all clamouring to be heard over the racket. A long line of them led to a hole in the wall, through which breakfast was being served.

Towers of dirty dishes loomed on the far side of the room. The procedure was obvious, but Sal stood frozen for a long moment, overwhelmed by the scene. It couldn't have been more different from the Keep, where barely two dozen students ate every morning in a small dining room overlooking the mountains; there they cooked for each other, and served themselves. Here the people were piled in like cattle, with cooks producing the vast quantities required and cleaners hovering in the wings to mop up the mess.

“What are you waiting for?” asked Skender, nudging him forward.

“Nothing,” he said, although his appetite had suddenly deserted him. Among all the students, some of them looking up curiously at the new arrivals, he had seen one face he recognised. The pale features, white hair, and pinkish



eyes stood out among all the dark complexions, as did the baleful glare.

It was Kemp. The bully from Fundelry had seen him and Shilly, and he obviously hadn't forgotten them. Kemp locked stares with Sal for a long moment, then coolly looked away. Sal didn't even attempt to convince himself that that was the end of it.

The food was lukewarm but good. Skender asked for and received generous servings of eggs, toast and baked beans and, once they had found a space in one of the less crowded corners of the hall, dedicated himself to eating the lot. Belilanca Brokate's caravan cook, Molash, had done his best to provide variety on the long journey south, but there was only so much you could do with bush vegetables and preserved meat. It was good to dive into something fresh in an environment that was completely and utterly new.

Only gradually did he become aware that he was the only one appreciating the sensory feast to its fullest.

"What's wrong?" he asked Shilly, who was listlessly stirring her eggs around her plate.

"Aren't you nervous?" she asked.

"About what?"

"Everything."

"Kemp is here," said Sal. He had only taken a couple of pieces of toast, and they were now cold.

"Oh, great," Shilly breathed. "That's all we need."

"You guys think too much." Skender scooped a spoonful of beans into his mouth.

"It's a survival trait," she said.

"No' if 'oo ftarve 'oo deff."

"I'm not likely to starve, the way you're flinging food

around.” Shilly wiped the front of her dress in disgust.

“Sorry,” Skender said, although he suspected that the food he had unintentionally spat on her might have made her dress slightly cleaner than before. None of them was in a terribly hygienic state. No one had shown them where to bathe properly or wash their clothes.

“What do you think we should do?” asked Sal, his voice barely audible over the ruckus surrounding them.

“The same as we agreed on the way here,” said Skender. “Troublemaker, tourist, try-hard.”

“But we weren’t expecting to be stuck in a school. We don’t know where we are in the city, or where Lo—” She cut herself off with a nervous glance over her shoulder. “Where anything else is.”

“That doesn’t change a thing,” Skender responded. “I’m still just a hanger-on, getting in the way. I haven’t done anything wrong, except stow away on the caravan. It’s you two they want and who they’ll be watching closely, because they know you don’t want to be here. While you’re drawing all the attention, I’ll slip away and try to find what you need. They’ll be glad not to have me under their feet all the time. That’s the way it works at home.”

He hoed back into his eggs, satisfied that his assessment of the situation was accurate.

“They’re only delaying the inevitable,” Sal said, poking his soggy toast and pushing the plate aside. “The Syndic is toying with us, dragging it out to see if we’ll snap.”

“I don’t think so,” said Shilly. “Remember what Atilde said? She’s put herself between us and the Syndic — or the Alcaide has put her there. One of the two. That means the Syndic isn’t getting everything her way.”

“You believe Atilde when she says that? She could be part of the Syndic’s plot.”

“I think you’re being paranoid, Sal.”

“I think we have to be. Why would the Alcaide help us?” Sal looked up as someone approached their table from behind Skender and Shilly. His expression was guarded, but unexpectedly cleared.

Skender turned in surprise to see a boy his own age with startlingly pronounced features. Protruding ears, nose and eyes lent the boy more than a passing resemblance to a bilby; his nature was almost as timid.

“Tom!” Sal exclaimed, a tangle of emotions in his voice: surprise, relief and sadness among them. “You’re here, too.”

“I said you’d come to the Haunted City.” The boy’s voice was softly pitched. “I dreamt it.”

“So you did,” said Shilly, twisting in her seat. “Got any other dreams to report? Anything concrete this time?”

Tom looked down at his feet. “I’m not going home,” he said. “Not now Tait is here.”

Skender had to strain to hear the boy’s words. On the surface, they didn’t make much sense. Tait, Behenna’s former assistant, was Tom’s older brother, whom Tom had idolised through his childhood, especially since Tait had been Selected for training as a Sky Warden. During the search for Sal in Fundelry, however, Tait had betrayed Tom’s confidence in order to betray Sal and Shilly, thereby increasing his standing in the eyes of his superiors. There was more to the story, Skender knew, but that was the gist of what Sal and Shilly had told him. The last time Sal and Shilly had seen Tom, he had sworn never to speak to his brother again.

“Does that mean you’ve forgiven him?” Shilly asked.

Tom shook his head, still looking at his toes. Before he could say anything, if he’d intended to, the tolling of a deep bell rolled through the hall. The tables instantly erupted in a rush of people pushing back plates and reaching for bags. The volume level rose twofold as farewells were exchanged, jokes finished and parting shots fired. Breakfast was over. Time for lessons.

Sal blanched. Shilly looked unsure of what to do. Skender took the opportunity to steal Sal’s uneaten toast and wipe his plate clean with it.

“Do you know where to go?” asked Tom, blinking around him like a very out-of-place owl.

“No,” said Sal, “we’ve only just arrived. No one’s told us anything, really.”

“In the morning, first year students study theory and illusions with Warden Bohm. In the afternoon, we break into tutor groups to practise.” Tom broke off as one of the hooded attendants approached the table.

“You won’t be joining classes just yet,” said the attendant. Skender matched the voice with that of the woman who had given them directions in the hallway. “First, you must make yourselves presentable. Come with me.”

The three of them stood as, without another word, Tom hurried off to join the stragglers draining from the hall.

“Aren’t we *ever* going to see anything of the Haunted City?” Sal was supposed to be the argumentative one, but Skender couldn’t rein in a small moment of irritation. Thus far, all they’d seen had been bricked-in tunnels and rooms of varying sizes, none of them with windows.

“When you’re ready,” said the attendant. “The longer

you delay, the later that will be.”

Skender rolled his eyes and let himself be led away.

Shilly hoped the shower would never end. Standing alone in an endless line of tiled stalls, she let the hot water scour away the weeks of dusty travel and sluice her hair clean. The water wasn't particularly warm, but it was fresh and cleaner than any she'd found on the road. She assumed it was piped in from the sea surrounding the island on which the Haunted City perched, charmed to remove its salt. When she'd cleaned her teeth earlier, it had tasted faintly of metal.

All too soon, though, the stream of water chugged three times and shut off. It wasn't like the Keep, she thought, where she could bathe in boiling hot water for any length of time as long as she turned up to classes promptly. Standing alone in the echoing girls' bathroom, she dried herself on a stiff, clean towel and dressed in the clothes an attendant had provided: a loose, grey top and grey, shin-length skirt; even the underwear they gave her was grey. She didn't know if that meant they had been worn by dozens of people before her, or whether grey was just the uniform of the Novitiate. At least they were clean. Finally, she thought, she was free of the stink of camel — which, like the ache in her leg, she had wondered if she would ever be free of.

Sal and Skender were waiting for her in the hall outside, dressed in matching outfits. She hadn't noticed the difference in their sizes before; Sal had grown a lot in the previous month, and now looked more like a young man than the boy he had once been, especially next to Skender, who was almost a head shorter and thin with it. Skender looked uncomfortable in the long shorts — and he probably was,

she realised, having worn robes most of his life. Just the one attendant was with them. The wardens had presumably decided to trust them not to run away, just yet.

To be honest with herself, Shilly had to admit that her curiosity had been whetted. All her life she had heard of people going to the Haunted City to become Sky Wardens, but no one knew any of the details of that process. What she had seen so far — Warden Atilde, the attendants, the breakfast hall full of students numbering more than the entire population of Fundelry — had intrigued her. This was her chance to find out the rest, and maybe begin looking for Lodo into the bargain.

It was not, therefore, hard to play the role she had been assigned, that of eager student ready to get to work.

“Where to now?” she asked, running her fingers through her hair to make it stand up as straight as it would go.

“I’ll give you a quick tour of the Novitiate grounds,” said the attendant. Shilly detected a faint note of warmth in the woman’s voice. “Master Warden Atilde has instructed me to ensure that you know your way around before I release you into the care of your tutor.”

“Is Atilde in charge of everything here?” Shilly asked, as the warden guided them briskly away from the bathrooms.

“In the Novitiate, yes. She answers to the Conclave, but they rarely get in her way. She has overseen the education of every Sky Warden in the Strand for more years than I’ve been alive.”

“What’s wrong with her?” asked Skender more bluntly. “Is she sick?”

The attendant hesitated slightly. “There was an accident, long ago, and she wastes away as a result. She fights it every

day, but how long she has left no one knows. She stands as a warning to us all that the Change can be dangerous, and that we should be careful when using it.”

“What sort of accident?” Skender pressed.

“That’s all I can say. If you need to know more, she will tell you herself.”

They rounded a corner and passed through an archway leading outside. There, for the first time, they saw the light of day in the Haunted City.

Shilly squinted in awe around her. It took her a minute to adjust to the brilliance of the sun — so bright after the mirror-lights and shadows of the Novitiate — but what she saw was no less magnificent than anything she had imagined. Impossibly tall and fragile-looking, the city towered above her like a waterfall of glass. Everywhere she looked she saw reflection and diffraction; light was seduced into the air between the towers and caught there, ricocheting among sweeping curves that defied the eye, bouncing forever between the seemingly infinite planes of glass. She felt as though she was inside a giant crystal, surrounded by silent, dazzling motion.

A long time ago, it seemed, on the road to the Nine Stars, the ex-warden Shom Behenna had granted her a vision of the city. She had not trusted him then; the vision could have been an illusion designed to impress her or any other country yokel he needed to win over in his travels. But what she saw before her was every bit as amazing as what she had been shown then, perhaps even more so.

“Wow,” Skender breathed, one hand shading his eyes as he turned in circles on the spot, taking everything in. “Incredible!”

“Just like the city in the Broken Lands,” said Sal, “but alive, not dead.”

“Don’t be fooled,” said the attendant. “We don’t call it the Haunted City for nothing.”

As Shilly’s eyes adjusted, she saw — just as she had in Behenna’s illusion — shapes moving behind the glass. Silhouettes and shades — never seen clearly but visible nonetheless — were everywhere she looked. Thousands upon thousands of people moving on mysterious errands, dressed in odd-looking garments of a multitude of colours. They seemed as impossibly tall and beautiful as the towers they inhabited, and she found herself full of something like sadness, for they were surely echoes of things that had been lost, ghosts of another time that hadn’t existed for more years than she could conceive.

“Do they talk?” asked Skender.

“No.” The attendant ushered them across a wide, flat, cobbled space leading from the tunnel exit to the base of one of the towers. The massive structures weren’t as crowded together as they had been in the ancient city ruins she and Sal had found in the Broken Lands, but there was still a strong sense of being closed in; the only glimpses of the sky itself came from far above. Her gaze, almost reluctantly, dropped lower, and she saw that more recent habitation had left its mark on the city. Smaller buildings, such as the one they had just left, clung like limpets to the bases of the massive structures. The towers were being used as buttress and framework for new walls and roofs. Shilly wondered why on earth anyone would build such seemingly primitive and makeshift structures when far more interesting architecture lay abandoned all around. It was like sleeping on



the floor in a house full of luxurious beds.

The attendant must have anticipated the question. She brought them to the base of one particular tower whose lower levels remained relatively exposed. Again, just like the city they had found in the salt lake, the towers seemed to emerge from the ground as though partially buried. The floor level of the tower before them was slightly lower than the ground, so they found themselves stooping to look inside.

There were several people visible in the hazy interior of the building, blurry as though seen through water. Their movements were ponderous and as indistinct as their forms. Shilly could barely tell that they were moving at all.

“The windows don’t open, do they?” said Sal, running one hand across the glass. Shilly did the same and found the surface to be cool and faintly waxy. Skender knocked, trying to get the hazy figures’ attention.

“The towers are sealed,” said the attendant. “We gave up trying to open them long ago. It is said that on the day they open the world as we know it will come to an end.”

“Invasion of the ghosts,” Skender joked.

“Or we’ll become the ghosts,” said Sal.

Although Shilly couldn’t clearly see the attendant’s face, a slight stiffening of the woman’s posture suggested that Sal’s comment was taken more seriously than it had been intended. “There has been at least one Cataclysm in the past, and there will almost certainly be such times again. It’s beyond our means to know what causes them or lies beyond them.”

“Look,” said Skender, “one’s coming closer.”

Shilly returned her attention to the other side of the

glass. Skender was right: one of the ghosts had broken away from the others and seemed to be approaching. Its slow, measured steps, the sluggish swinging of its arms, the feeling of timelessness, as though the passage of seconds was different for it than for her, hypnotised Shilly as it came nearer, resolving by minute increments into a tall man with narrow, distinguished features. She wasn't aware of anything else around her; the eerie glamour of what lay before her had captured her completely.

The ghost — the man inside the glass — snapped into sharp focus as he loomed as close to the window as she was, but on the other side, looking up at her in her slightly elevated position, eyes wide and almost pleading ...

A sharp squawking broke the spell. She blinked and turned away, startled. Behind her, two large seagulls descended to the ground with a flutter of feathers and glared at her with black eyes.

Sal said something, but she didn't hear it. Her gaze drifted back through the glass as though pulled there, but the ghost was gone. As quickly as though it hadn't ever moved, it was back with the others, little more than a person-shaped blur far away.

"Are you okay, Shilly?" asked Sal, louder this time.

"Did you see him?" she asked, her voice seeming to echo in her ears.

"Of course," said Skender. "One of them looked as though it was coming over to look back at us, but it turned away. Teasing us."

"They don't know we're here," said the attendant. "We must keep moving. I need to show you the practice rooms, the tutor hall and the library before taking you to the

## The Storm Weaver and the Sand

lecture theatre to join the others. You've been assigned a tutor; he will look after you from there."

As she led the three of them away, Shilly looked over her shoulder at the trio of ghosts trapped inside the building. She couldn't make out any details at all and she was beginning to wonder, as her head cleared, if she had imagined the whole thing. But she knew, somehow, that one of them was watching her closely. The feeling didn't fade when she turned a corner, and the trio were out of sight.

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# When three runaways —

Sal, Shilly and Skender — finally arrive at the remote island of the Haunted City, home of the Sky Wardens, Sal's great-aunt, the Syndic, is determined to keep them under control.

And if that means imprisonment, so be it.

But the Syndic isn't the least of Sal's worries. The ghosts that live behind the ancient glass of the city are restless and no one knows why or what they can do. The golem will force Sal to do its bidding by whatever means necessary ... even murder. And it seems that the Weavers have their own plans for the three of them — but what and who are they? Few people believe they exist, and those who do keep their knowledge close to their chests.

Whichever path Sal chooses, it seems the price to pay is very high for those closest to him. But he must decide ... or submit to a future not of his making ...



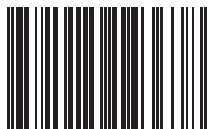
'The reason why I haven't given up completely on fantasy trilogies is because there are people out there who believe in the genre and continue to put out interesting books rather than following the formula.

Sean Williams is one of those people.' —CHERYL MORGAN

'*The Storm Weaver and the Sand* is a superior Australian fantasy novel, but more than this: it is simply superior fantasy.' —THE WEST AUSTRALIAN

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