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SEAN
WILLIAMS

THE
SKYWARDEN
AND THE SUN

SECOND BOOK OF THE CHANGE

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BOOKS

CHAPTER 1
BETWEEN SKY AND STONE



They were being hunted.

At first, Sal wasn't certain of it. When he and Shilly fled Fundelry ahead of the storm Lodo had summoned, he thought they might outrun pursuit. They drove furiously, pushing the buggy and themselves as hard as they could in the least obvious direction, heading east across the rolling, water-logged dunes, avoiding roads and all signs of life until dawn lightened the sky ahead of them.

Crudely covered by a waterproofed tarpaulin, nestled between the banks of a narrow, stony-bedded creek, Sal and Shilly, with the machine that was their greatest hope of obtaining freedom, waited out the day in a state of feverish dread. Half-expecting capture at any moment, they slept fitfully. Silent under the shade, exhausted and grieving, neither dared voice the fears that urged them to keep running.

And as the sun rode higher in the sky, burning the

storm away, Sal found reason to be afraid.

Bridging all the distance they had covered in an instant, the Syndic's mental eye swept over them. Sal closed his mind tightly and concentrated on the exercises Lodo had given him, picturing himself as a slippery ball bearing that the Syndic's fingers could not grasp. Once he had thought the owner of that far-seeing, unearthly gaze to be almost god-like, but he knew better now: she was just a woman, a person with limitations like anyone else.

The last time Sal had seen her, his paternal great-aunt, she had been sprawled at the base of a dune, knocked flat by a raw outpouring of the Change that had come from somewhere within him when she tried to take him captive. The memory of that outpouring left him cold; he never dreamed he had anything like that at his beck and call.

He had wondered then if she was dead, if he had killed her, but Nu Zanshin of Farrow clearly didn't give up easily, or quickly.

Her fingers did slip. Clumsy in their eagerness, they went reaching away past the two fugitives, heading north-east. He didn't allow himself to relax. They might have evaded her this time, but he would have to be careful in future or their freedom would be short-lived.

When night fell, they followed the creek inland as far as they could go. The buggy was no stranger to rugged terrain, but Sal was unused to driving and didn't want to risk a broken axle on the jagged rocks and crumbling banks. He figured that slow progress was better than none at all. Taking that into account, and the need to avoid human contact wherever possible, he didn't let himself hope to travel more than a hundred kilometres that second night.

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The buggy had fuel to last almost a week at that rate of travel, and the more ground he could put between them and Fundelry, the better.

They hit relatively open country shortly after midnight, under cold skies with stars glinting like hail waiting to fall. Sal focused his attention on the buggy and the controls he had watched his father use so many times before. He tried not to think about his father's death or the revelation that had preceded it: that the man he thought of as his father might not have been his father at all. Instead, he concentrated on the roughness of the ground ahead, glowing faintly in the light from the shuttered headlamps, on the gears and on the whine of the motor. He felt the mental wheels of the exercise Lodo called the Cellaton Mandala turning behind the effort of driving, and had faith that it would deflect any further attempts to find him by the Syndic. He ignored the rumble in his stomach telling him that they hadn't eaten the previous day; not since the Alders' Feast in Fundelry, the night before last, when his father had still been alive and it had seemed there was still a chance that Lodo could save them from the Sky Wardens.

Driving gave him an excuse for not talking, although the truth was that he couldn't find the words to express what he wanted to say. He wanted to tell Shilly that he was sorry. He wanted to say, *You don't have to come with me; this isn't your problem; you can leave whenever you want*, but he was afraid. What would he do if she *did* leave? He didn't want to be alone. And he didn't know how to say that, either. So he said nothing.

They drove straight through the second day and slept that night in a Ruin he knew of near an abandoned town

called Cleve's Well. There they were safe from the Syndic, since the signature of his mind would disappear in the ancient place's unique aura. The ambient levels of the Change were strong there, not rooted so much in living things or particular rock formations, but in events that had taken place long ago and left their mark forever. The high level of background potential had an additional effect on them beyond providing security. He dreamed that night that he was being followed, among other things, and woke to find Shilly crying silently in her sleep.

The next morning, after a breakfast consisting solely of the fruit and bark from a desert pear bush, he tried to talk to her.

He told her the story of his parents: how his mother, Seirian Mierlo, had married an ambitious older man named Highson Sparre in order to increase the prestige of her family. Lodo, who had explained this to Sal, had known little more about the history of Seirian's family beyond the fact that they had emigrated from the Interior to the Strand in order to escape a scandal. That was enough, however, to place the rest in context. Sal's mother had fallen in love with Dafis Hrvati, a journeyman bound in service to an acquaintance of her husband, and neither her divorce nor their union had been condoned by any of the families involved.

So the lovers had run away together, into the borderlands. They had remained fugitives for a year, until the Sky Wardens, led by Highson and his aunt, Nu Zanshin — who was not yet Syndic, but would be before long — located Seirian by virtue of her use of the Change. They spirited her back to the Haunted City, whereupon they had learnt

of Sayed, her son, who had been given the use-name of Sal. Why his existence made so much difference, Sal didn't know, but it seemed to. For some reason the Sky Wardens were more interested in him than either of his parents.

Although the Sky Wardens recommenced their search immediately, Sal had disappeared along with his father. The two of them had remained hidden ever since, protected by the father's denial of everything he had ever known in the past: music, the Change, and his lover. His priority was to protect Sal, as his mother would surely have wanted. In the end, only Sal's growing potential at the Change — and his father's attempt to hide it by seeking help from Lodo, a renegade Stone Mage — had given them away. It was then that they had learned, from the Alcaide himself, of Sal's mother's death: she had wasted away when attempts to find Sal and his father had failed. Despairing of ever seeing them again, she had died of a broken heart.

Shilly listened patiently — or seemed to, at least — as he spoke. Everything after his arrival in Fundelry she knew about, since she had been involved in it. Although she, like Sal's father, had no natural talent, Lodo had been her teacher too, and his instruction had enabled her to bend another's talent to her own will. In many respects, her understanding of the Change was much deeper than Sal's, who had, until two weeks earlier, never suspected what potential he had. When the Sky Wardens had come to take him so they could train him in their way, he had decided to keep running, and Shilly had been swept up in the storm.

He didn't need to tell her about that, just as he didn't want to tell her how to think or to feel about it, since he himself was still trying to work that out. He just wanted

her to know the full story.

If she understood it, or him, any better when he had finished, she gave no sign. She sat silently beside him in the buggy, as dark-skinned as he was fair, skinny under the simple cotton dress she wore everywhere. Her sun-bleached hair strayed across her face and her green eyes revealed nothing, betraying not the slightest hint of what she was feeling behind the mask. One finger doodled patterns in the dust that caked the side of the buggy.

Eventually she said, "Your mother had family in the Interior, right?"

"Yes." He knew very little about them except that they had come from somewhere called Mount Birrinah and been expelled from the Strand following his parents' elopement. "The Mierlos."

"You'll be looking for them, I suppose."

Sal opened his mouth to tell her that he hadn't decided where he wanted to go. But he didn't say it. After a lifetime of following his father around, he wasn't used to making decisions.

"I was thinking about Skender Van Haasteren," she said.

"Lodo's teacher? What about him?"

"He'd help us, I'm sure." She turned to look at him. Her face was expressionless, but her eyes were brimming over with tears. "That's where *I* want to go. You can drop me off on the way to visit your family. You don't have to come with me all the way."

Sal nodded. Lodo's teacher was from the Desert Port region; the old man had told him that much. Sal didn't know exactly where that was, but he knew one thing: both

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Mount Birrinah and Skender Van Haasteren were in the Interior. Maybe, he thought, the details weren't important. For the moment, his destination and Shilly's could lie in the same direction, if he so chose. Away from Fundelry. Away from the Syndic and her Sky Warden bloodhounds.

"Do you think Lodo is dead?" he asked her.

Her eyes were red. "They killed your father, didn't they?"

He nodded. It seemed too much to hope that Lodo had somehow beaten the Sky Wardens and escaped. They had heard nothing from him since they had fled the tremor that had saved them. The obvious assumption was that Lodo had been overwhelmed by the Alcaide in the same way that his father had been.

"It'll be tough," he said. "It's a long way."

"But we can make it, can't we?"

He shrugged. "We might just get there in the end, if we work together."

Only then did he remember that she had never been more than a few hundred metres away from the sea, not once in her entire life. Confronted by the distance they had to travel, *he* quailed inside. He had been to the Divide several times, but never beyond it, and that had been with his father, whose absence ached inside his chest as if a hole had been opened there. If he was uncertain, he thought, then she must be terrified.

But if she could do it, so could he.

"North it is," she said, her gaze returning to the horizon ahead. "Together."

And that was that. He turned the steering wheel to point the buggy inland, and he drove.

And they drove: out of the sand dunes and into firmer country, with round, weathered hills the colour of brown, lifeless dirt. They stuck to dry riverbeds and isolated road fragments as often as they could. Maps in the buggy's tool box gave them a rough idea of where to head, although many of the landmarks had changed over the years and they were passing through places Sal had not visited before. They travelled under the cover of night when there were signs of habitation, but the daylight was better for navigation. With the sun burning down on them out of a sky now utterly free of clouds, they took great care to maintain a shade, unfurling the buggy's tarpaulin to act as a roof which flapped noisily as they drove. But still they burned. Even Shilly's dark skin was tender for the first few days, and peeled after a week.

They passed ancient and recent life, among them spindly metal towers, many metres high, that had rusted and then slumped when their bases could no longer support their weight. A craterous mine ate into a hillside like a terrible, wasting disease, grey around the edges and half-filled with black water. By its edge rested an enormous crane, gutted for its parts but still glittering with the Change. Crumbling cemeteries made poignant companions to equally derelict buildings, some little more than chimneys and hearths standing alone in fields untended for decades. Some structures were welcome shelter from the heat, the best of them hollow, gap-toothed silos that reverberated with the buggy's engine when the two runaways arrived, and hummed with the wind when all was still again.

Shilly lay awake in the silos, listening to the hum and feeling as though she was privy to one side of a conversation

between gods, so slow and ponderous that she couldn't decipher individual words.

But it was the landscape that threw her off-balance the most. It smelled different, and it looked different. She was used to gently rolling sand dunes and the occasional cliff face, a world defined by its relationship with the sea.

Here, the world extended in all directions the same, and it was alien in ways that weren't immediately obvious. The ground, for a start, grew redder the further north they travelled. The trees were taller and less bushy than the ones she was used to. Once they came across a forest of slender trees that had been burned in a recent bushfire; their hearts still lived, and new leaves grew green in vivid contrast to the blackened bark. As with the trees, the distant hills were larger, but had fewer angles than those closer to the coast; they were like the rolling shoulders and hips of reclining giants, their eyes closed just over the horizon. Everything around her was worn and dusty and hot — and seemed utterly empty.

Up close there was detail aplenty. Three-cornered jacks waited for her if she was careless enough to wander off in bare feet. Insects jumped around them in great hordes — tiny flying ones that stung, and heavy hoppers that could hurt from momentum alone. Fat, black flies dangled in the air as though on the end of invisible strings, and many-legged creatures left furrowed tracks in the dirt. Birds with wings like outstretched hands drifted in updrafts, sharp eyes seeking insects and small animals below. Shilly hadn't seen any of the latter yet, although she heard them rustling at night.

The bugs and sun didn't seem to bother Sal as much

as they did her, thanks to the protective earring he wore through a hole in his ear. There was no point to wishing she had a ward like that. She gathered that they were very rare; it was one of the things that had tipped Lodo to Sal's importance when he had arrived in Fundelry. His mother had given it to him when he had been born to protect him from minor injuries.

But they weren't so minor, she thought, when there were lots of them at once. All she could was grit her teeth and endure.

By Ottewill Peak, Stonehouse and the Devil's Brook they went, across fields once sown but now fallow and stony. Some were infested with purple-flowering weeds that Sal called "the curse" but which Shilly found startlingly beautiful. Sal let her handle the navigation, while he drove. The maps didn't tell her anything about where she was going: they didn't describe how the air smelt, or if there would be people nearby, or what there might be to eat. It was simply her job to read the names and watch the places go by, having learned little more about them in the process. They didn't stop anywhere interesting — if there *was* anything of interest in this arid, stony land. All they did was travel and sleep. She forced herself not to fight the buggy as it bounced across the hard, new world she had been propelled into, even when it felt like her muscles had been pounded to jelly and her bones were on the verge of shattering.

On the fifth day, with the sun high in the sky, she begged for a rest stop. A headache painted bright, flashing dots behind her eyelids and she was afraid she might scream the next time she had to get out and push the buggy

from a sandy patch. While she leaned back into the seat with her hat over her eyes, trying to remember why she was putting herself through this, Sal ducked away to investigate a nearby patch of vegetation.

“This is from the yukuri vine,” he said when he returned, holding up a number of small, greenish fruit. He opened one and removed some of the pulp within. “I chose this spot because I recognised its leaves. Close your eyes.”

She did so warily, lifting her hat when he asked, and letting him rub the moist flesh across her eyelids and forehead. It felt cool against her skin, although it had a bitter smell. His touch was soft.

“This’ll make you feel better.”

It did. Within a few minutes, her headache had ebbed to the point where it only nagged rather than dominated. She didn’t move, letting the seat take her weight while Sal clattered about with their stuff, unfurling the sleeping bag they shared if it was cold at night and preparing the tarp to cover the buggy. He had decided to make the rest stop more permanent without consulting her, and she was more grateful than she could say for that. She knew she should be helping him, but she had no energy; she seemed to weigh as much as one of the giants whose backs they traversed every day. Tears pricked at her closed eyes: she was a dead weight, but he never complained.

She said nothing, either. Every time she opened her mouth, she was afraid of what might come out. She didn’t want to blame him for the mess they were in for he had as little control over it as she did. If she was caught up with him, that was just bad luck; it could have happened to anyone. And wishing that she had never met him was

like wishing the sun wouldn't rise in the east. She couldn't change anything about it now, unable as she was to drive, and having nowhere near enough money to pay someone else for passage to the Interior. She could only float with the current and see where it took her.

Floating: that was what she was doing. For the first time in her life, control of her immediate fate had been turned over to someone else, and it didn't sit well with her. She knew Sal would rather she talked to him about it, but she wasn't ready for that and didn't know when she would be. When Sal stopped running, perhaps then she would talk. Running was, she knew, his preferred means of avoiding anything too difficult to deal with, the same in principle to her silence. If they could meet halfway, perhaps then they would make the distance together.

The next day, they dared human contact to buy fuel for the buggy, and food, using the small amount of change they had between them. She went through the motions while Sal stayed out of sight in the buggy. If the landowners had been told to keep an eye out for anyone on the run from the Sky Wardens, they showed no sign of it. They accepted the fake name she offered, took her money, filled the buggy's tanks with alcohol, and let them go.

"We can't afford to relax yet," Sal said that night, as they took shelter in yet another dry creek bed. Being close to a major town, they didn't draw attention to themselves by travelling with lights on during the darkness. "I can still feel her looking."

Shilly nodded, having nothing to add. He was right: they couldn't relax yet. According to her map, they weren't even a quarter of the way to where she wanted to be. The

only way she could think of possibly surviving the journey was to forget about the past — and even the present. Their destination was all that mattered, no matter how far away it seemed or what she had to put up with on the way. It would be worth it, she told herself. It had to be.

Northwest of Kittle they found one end of an old railway line that wound up through the hills. The terrain ahead was rugged. Long since stripped of its valuable metals, Sal hoped that the Old Line, as the ancient railway was called, would be a passable track. His father had never travelled that route, but had talked of it once, when they wound their way along the usual road between the Broken Lands and the more gentle plains of the Strand. That route, the Yelverton Track, was relatively wide and safe, but well used because of it and an obvious place for the Sky Wardens to lie in wait for them.

“We have two choices,” he told Shilly at the base of the Old Line. “We take the buggy and hope for the best, or we leave the buggy behind and make our way on foot. What do you think?”

She seemed to consider the options, but didn’t offer an opinion beyond shrugging.

“If we walk,” he went on, “obviously it’ll take longer, but it will be safer. That’s assuming we can find a path if the Old Line peters out, or can make our own. It’s tough in there and I can’t guarantee anything.”

He didn’t bother to explain why they needed to head in that direction in the first place. There were only two safe places to cross the Divide; that was clear from the map before him. The pass they were heading for, to the west, was the least travelled.

“I think we should take the buggy,” he concluded. “There’ll be a long way to go when we reach the far side. The Divide is still 600 kilometres away. Without the buggy it’ll take months to reach the Interior. It’s worth the risk now to save time later. Do you agree?”

She frowned, her expression saying more clearly than words: *Why are you asking me this? It’s clear you’ve already made up your mind.*

“We can talk about it, if you want,” he said. “Maybe I’ve missed something.”

She shook her head and adjusted her hat so the shadow covered her eyes. With one hand she pointed irritably forward, to the Old Line.

He waited a moment to give her a chance to speak, but that was clearly all he was going to get. It was the closest he had come all day to provoking a genuine reaction out of her, so he didn’t mind so much. And he had her tacit approval to proceed. It would have to be enough.

They discovered that the Old Line consisted of a rutted, gravely surface. Erosion by rain and wind made it uneven and treacherous. He proceeded slowly and carefully, even along straight sections. Sometimes the missing railway sloped upward into the hills, or it snaked around slabs of rock larger than houses and through earth that had been laid down millions of years before. The scenery, when he had time to look at it, was magnificent in a bleak, time worn way.

Nightfall — their seventh since leaving Fundelry — brought an end to the day’s sightseeing and to the first leg of their journey on the Old Line. The way was dangerous enough by daylight, when the frequent cracks and rockfalls

could be clearly seen and negotiated. During the dark it would be suicidal to continue on. They camped in the lee of an overhanging cliff, the same red-brown colour as dried blood, under which the Old Line passed. In its shadows Sal noted an effect his father had once spoken of, but which he had never before felt: under the cliff face the background potential faded to zero, and he lost all sense of the world around him. It was as though the Change had been sucked out of him and drawn into the ground, where it dissipated and vanished. The feeling was unnerving, but not one that threatened any harm.

Figuring that he would be as safe here as he was in a Ruin, he didn't mind camping for the night. They even risked a fire and boiled a measure of their precious water for their first cooked meal in a week. Sal had been collecting fruit and edible leaves everywhere they stopped. He added these to a number of small grubs he had dug out from under a tree that morning and created what his father had named a 'desert stew'. Shilly's skin went a shade lighter when she saw him put in the grubs, but she ate her half without complaint. She couldn't complain, he supposed, if she wouldn't talk.

The night was cold. Shilly slept under the tarp while he sat up to watch the stars. Humming an old tune to himself, enjoying this time of relative privacy, he went through the contents of his pack by feel until he found his way to the clasp wrapped in soft leather near the bottom; it had belonged to his mother and, Lodo said, symbolised the Earth. But that wasn't what he was looking for. Deeper still lay the heavy, grey globe that the old man had given him on his last night in Fundelry. It was like one of the powerful

globes Lodo had used to store light during the day and then illuminate Fundelry at night, but this one was smaller and denser, more mysterious still. Lodo had said on giving it to him, *I think you will need a little light in the future, wherever you go*, and had bade him to keep it secret from Shilly. Sal had done so, although his conscience nagged at him.

He drew it out into the starlight and cradled it in his lap. It was as heavy as he remembered and cool to the touch. No light reflected off it. He pressed his palms against its smooth surface and enclosed it in his fingers. Shutting his eyes, he sought any sign of recognition within it, the slightest hint that it knew what it was for and could tell him how to use it. But there was nothing. His thoughts vanished into the globe like rain down a well. Part of him thought that that might be a result of the Change-deadening place they occupied, but a greater part suspected otherwise. He would have to learn how to reveal the globe's secrets, just as he had had to learn to use other Change-endowed artefacts. The Change wasn't something he could use intuitively, no matter how much innate talent he had. It was a skill acquired through hours of practice. And it was a responsibility, Shilly had said.

With that thought in his head, he put the globe back into his pack, rested his back against the wheel of the buggy and slept.

He dreamed that the globe was burning brightly, just as it had in his dream shortly after leaving Fundelry. Again he saw the bully, Kemp, in the golden tower, the ghostly city buried in sand, a tunnel mouth guarded by two swinging corpses, an old woman who looked something like himself, and a talking statue. Lodo was in the dream, and so was

Tait, a journeyman like Sal's father had once been.

Tait, whose brother Tom had befriended Sal in Fundelry, was leading a Sky Warden in blue robes across a desert. The first time he had had the dream, the identity of this man eluded him. Now it came to him: it was Shom Behenna, the new Selector of the Fundelry region. More powerful than his predecessor, Amele Centofanti, he had taken over her position when she had failed to detect Sal.

It wasn't until after they woke the next morning and inched their way from beneath the shadow of the rock that Sal guessed what the man was doing in his dreams.

As soon as they left the Change-numbing bubble of safety and entered the background potential, Sal felt the Syndic's eye abroad — again scouring the Strand for any sign of him.

He evaded her with greater ease than before. Her mind was distant, diffused across the very large space she had to search. But beneath her grasping lay that of another mind, one subtler than hers, and nearer. He felt it as a gentle *tap-tap* against his defences rather than a full-scale assault. Just as an ant might find access where a human hand might not, this mind sought to insinuate itself without him noticing. It prodded at him for a while, and then went away. It returned later on, as though to check that he was still there. He knew it was Shom Behenna as surely as he knew that one misstep would send him tumbling off the Old Line to his death in the valley below.

Tap-tap.

Sal went cold at the feel of this new, more sophisticated pursuer. Had Behenna found him? Did he know where Sal and Shilly were, and where they were headed? Sal fervently

hoped not. He was uncertain just how much information could be conveyed by that gentle *tap-tap*. Perhaps Behenna could tell nothing more than that Sal was still alive, and maybe roughly where he was. The latter didn't please him; he had, after all, hoped to slip out of the Strand completely unnoticed. But if Behenna *did* know, where were the gulls, descending out of the sky *to* confirm the location? Where were the Sky Wardens to drag them back to the Haunted City?

He didn't tell Shilly. They had enough to worry about, with the Old Line to negotiate and the Broken Lands ahead. And it didn't change anything. They were still running. They simply had a better idea, now, of who they were running from.

The last stage of the Old Line was the worst. The northern face of the range was almost sheer, as though someone had torn the range in two and they were descending the walls into the rift valley. The missing middle was nowhere to be seen, however. Shilly imagined it being thrown into the Interior, on the other side of the Divide. Or maybe it had been swallowed up by the plain like an ocean might swallow a leaky boat.

Whenever the buggy's wheels slipped beneath them, all such speculation was instantly forgotten. Sal inched the buggy forward through such areas while she walked behind, carrying their packs. That way, if the buggy did fall, they might not lose everything. Sal was ever ready to jump free; they could walk the rest of the way if necessary.

So she thought, anyway, until they came to the bridge.

The great cataclysm that had torn the mighty range in two had sent fingers of destruction into the midst of

the hills. The ravine below them was one such example. Its walls were sheer and angular; the creek far below, even when full, could not have carved it. To their left and right it stretched out for kilometres. The side they occupied offered no route down to the bottom; only on the far side had the ancient builders of the line found a way to descend to the plains. There would have been no benefit in building the bridge, otherwise.

When built, she supposed, it had been a piece of engineering to be proud of: it spanned the gap in a smooth arch of around one hundred metres, with no supports, which had held up a perfectly flat length of track. Where the tracks had been were lengths of decaying concrete and rusted metal grates, forming a road of sorts wider than the buggy was long. Staring across the gap-toothed mesh the buggy would have to traverse, with the depths of the ravine below, Shilly had a sudden premonition that something was going to go wrong.

Sal threw a rock out onto the bridge. It clattered noisily. The bridge didn't suddenly crumble into dust, which was only a slight relief. They still didn't know whether to turn around and go back.

"There's a safety rail," he said, indicating the waist-high barrier on either side of the span. "That makes it stronger."

He walked twenty paces out onto the bridge and looked around. Shading his eyes, he looked along the ravine. Then he pointed into the far distance to Shilly's right.

"Yor!" he shouted to her. "That's where we're headed."

She couldn't see it from where she was standing on the last metre of road and she didn't really care at that moment. The bridge was just one more hurdle to get over on the

way to Skender Van Haasteren. Sal lowered his hand and gingerly picked his way back to her.

Where the rails had been were two strips of long, plank-like beams just wide enough for the buggy's tyres. It was a close fit; the slightest deviation would threaten to slide the buggy onto the rusty grille. The grille was supported by metal bars every metre or so. If all four wheels slipped off the planks, she didn't see how they could possibly get them back up. That was, of course, assuming that the planks would take the weight of the buggy in the first place ...

Sal sat in the driver's seat. He didn't say anything for a moment, and Shilly waited, watching him. She thought he looked older than he had before, in Fundelry, although that could just have been the effect of the freckles spreading over his pale skin, and the dirt. If he didn't look older, he definitely looked more serious.

"You go first," he said. "Take the packs. Go all the way across and wait for me there."

"Don't be stupid," she said, the first real sentence she had uttered for days.

"It's not stupid. There's no need to risk both of us. If I fall, you can keep on going."

"If you fall, I'm as good as dead. I don't know anything about this place. I'll starve, or be bitten by something, or fall foul of the locals." She felt a heavy resentment of her situation rising up inside her, but she fought through it to what really bothered her. "If you fall, I don't want to stand over there and watch you die."

"I'm not going to fall —" Sal began.

"So I won't either. To make sure, I'll walk ahead of you. If the bridge won't take *my* weight, you'll know to turn

back.”

For a moment he seemed about to argue. Then something like relief spread across his face, and he nodded. She turned away to get out of the buggy and put on her pack, hoping the fear she was feeling wasn't so obvious.

Sal started the buggy's engine and inched it forward until its front wheels were a metre back from the beginning of the bridge. Shilly took a deep breath and stepped onto the plank opposite the one Sal had walked along before, since she already knew the first one was safe. Even without looking around, she sensed the emptiness of the ravine enclose her as she put one step in front of the other, then another, then another. She tried not to look too far down, even though she had to make judgements about the integrity of the bridge. She just walked carefully, as she might across the beams of a rundown jetty. *I will not fall*, she told herself. *It's only a hundred paces across.*

The bridge creaked as the buggy moved slowly onto it. She felt the planks flex beneath her and refused to breathe any faster. She looked over her shoulder and saw Sal, white-faced, inching the buggy along. Its weight made rusty rivets pop and ancient metal groan; every metre or so it jerked slightly as if something small had given way beneath it.

Perhaps, she thought, they should have taken some of their supplies over first. Without the extra fuel and water tanks, it would have been lighter, less of a strain; and they could have inspected the way properly first, too. But she hadn't thought to suggest that, and it was too late now.

Looking ahead was her job. Sal gave her a quick thumbs-up, and she turned her attention forward again, watching where she placed her feet and looking for any sign

of weakness. The ancient builders had done their job well. She never felt desperately unsafe, even at the halfway point, when the wind sang past the soles of her feet and the sense of space around her was at its peak.

She glanced in the direction Sal had indicated before and saw on the horizon a smudge that could have been a town. Yor, she presumed, whatever that was.

The rest of the way was in shadow, but she had the measure of it now: walk forward ten paces and wait for Sal to catch up; think of how good it would be to feel solid earth underfoot; don't look down to where that same earth waited, far, far below; savour the moment of stillness as long as it lasted, and be glad that she wasn't in the buggy with Sal, who wouldn't get to rest at all until he joined her on the far side. He could afford neither to stop nor to go too quickly. The buggy crawled along in slow motion, as if in a dream that would never end.

Yet the edge of the ravine grew clearer with every press forward. The bridge terminated in a road no different to the one they had left. Dusty, unsafe, abandoned — it looked like paradise the more she thought about it. Once there, the hurdle would be crossed, they could keep moving on.

Forty metres to go. Thirty. Twenty.

It happened just before the last rest stop, with only eleven metres left. She had barely taken her ninth step when she heard a new noise from behind her over the burbling of the buggy's engine: a groan, or a creak. It was not as dramatic as a crack, but still of concern. She turned immediately and opened her mouth to shout a question at Sal, to ask if he had heard it too, when it came again, louder, and the plank beneath her *twanged* like a plucked string.

Sal clearly felt or heard *that*. His eyes grew wide and the buggy jerked forward with a snarl as instinctive panic drove the accelerator downward. It stopped after a metre or two, and for a split second Shilly thought that that was it, that the crisis was over and their slow progress would continue. But then she realised that the engine was still snarling, and its front wheels were slipping.

Something clattered far below. She didn't look down; she didn't need to. If part of the bridge had fallen away and the buggy was teetering on the lip of a precipice, it would look exactly like this.

The buggy tipped backward slightly. Sal glanced behind him, then looked firmly forward again and put his foot down. The engine roared to no avail.

Shilly ran forward, toward him, reaching. "Give me your hand!"

"No! I can do it!"

You can't! she wanted to scream. He couldn't see what she could. Behind the front mudguards, the wheels had already lifted off the surface of the planks. He would have no traction, front or back, no matter how hard he accelerated. There was nothing he could do to arrest the buggy's slide backward. And down.

Except ... If he wouldn't jump and there wasn't time to explain, there was only one thing she could do. She leapt into the air and brought both feet down hard on its front bumper bar. Her extra weight brought the spinning wheels into contact with the planks and the buggy lurched forward. Taken by surprise, Sal struggled with the steering wheel and Shilly sprawled helplessly across the bonnet. The rear wheels screeched and the buggy slewed wildly across

the bridge, crossing the remaining distance in a little more than a second — but not in a straight line. First it jumped off the planks and scraped against the left safety rail with a shower of sparks. Then it fishtailed to the right side. One metre from the edge the buggy impacted with the right rail hard enough to pivot it entirely around, so that when it finally came to rest, on the solid, red earth, it was facing the way it had come, toward the bridge that had so narrowly let them pass.

The engine died and everything was silent. But ringing in Shilly's ears was the crack she had heard when the buggy struck the right-side rail with her strewn across its bonnet. For a second, she entertained the hope that it was the buggy that was broken, not her — but then the pain hit, and she screamed.

CHAPTER 2

THE BROKEN



Sal saw stars when the buggy juddered to a halt on the road. His mind was a mess of impressions: the terrible sensation of sliding backward into the hole in the bridge, followed by the wild rush forward, out of control, when Shilly tipped the buggy so its front wheels could get a grip. He had bruised his chest on the steering wheel when they had struck one of the guard rails, and he dreaded to think how much damage had been done in the impact. If they had cracked the radiator, or the sump ...

Shilly's cry instantly cleared his head. She was hunched over on the hot bonnet of the buggy, trying to sit up. He got out to help, but she slipped off and fell onto the ground before he could reach her, and she screamed again.

When he saw the blood, his stomach seemed to plummet to the bottom of the ravine.

"Shilly!" He instantly went to her, not needing to ask

where she was hurt. Her right leg lay folded beneath her in an impossible way, broken in many places when crushed between the buggy and the guardrail. Her face was a sickly yellow, and getting paler by the second. She clutched at him and pulled him closer.

“No blame,” she hissed through clenched teeth, her eyes not really seeing him. “No —”

Then she was unconscious and limp in his arms, arterial blood splashing thickly over his knees and onto the road. The stink of it nearly made him gag, but he suppressed it along with the panic boiling upward in his chest. He had to think clearly. People died from injuries like this.

The most immediate problems were the bleeding and the major break in her thigh. What little herbal lore he knew would be of no use to him. There were few plants around, for a start, and none of the right type to promote clotting. Instead, he tried to wipe away the blood as best he could, but it kept flowing from the wound. He put his fingers around the tear in her thigh, holding the skin tight against the thick splinter of bone sticking out of her. That lessened the steady pulsing, giving him time to think.

His first thought was to make a splint out of the wreckage of the bridge and tie it on with strips torn from the tarpaulin. Her unconsciousness was a blessing because it would be easier for him to straighten the leg, provided she didn't remain unconscious for too long. The longer she bled the deeper into shock she would go, so the sooner he got started the better.

The moment he released his grip on the wound to go and get the things he needed, the pulsing started again. The puddle of blood had already spread all around them;

he was drenched from the waist down and up to his elbows. If she had any blood left in her, which seemed incredible, he knew she couldn't afford to lose much more.

The situation couldn't possibly have been worse. He couldn't move for fear of killing her, but he couldn't save her *unless* he moved. Meanwhile, the sense of *her* that nagged at him when they were close was ebbing. All he could do was crouch by her as she slowly faded away.

Anger and frustration welled in his chest. Shilly had saved his life. He *refused* to watch her die.

His one remaining hope lay within. Reaching deep inside himself, he sought the source of the Change. There had to be something it could do to help her. If he couldn't use it to save a life, what was it good for?

He imagined a hole inside him, a tunnel leading not down or left or backward, but in an entirely new direction, one he couldn't describe. He stretched his mind along it, probing. Deeper. Something stirred, but it was formless, useless. He tried harder, reached deeper, but still nothing happened.

"Help me!" he screamed. Only echoes answered his call. The Change eluded him. "Help me save her!"

Think, he told himself. *There has to be a way!*

The answer came to him from an unexpected quarter: not from the Change, but from a voice that spoke through the Change, directly into his mind.

"*Shape*," it said.

Sal stiffened. Lodo had spoken to him this way once, during his brief training. He had the feeling of grey clouds parting — the same grey as the terrible Void Beneath — just long enough for a word to sneak through, a single word

from another mind a great distance away. Then the grey crashed back in to seal the breach. He didn't recognise the mental voice.

Another word came: "*Will.*"

Understanding was like a firework going off. The Change wasn't a servant; it had no intelligence of its own. Shouting at it wasn't going to tell it what to do, no matter how much he wanted it to. He had to *explain*.

The words came again from the distant mind — "*Shape will*" — but he had the concept, now. Shilly had explained it to him in the Ruin near Fundelry, when he had tried to make light blossom from a stone. He had to picture in his mind what he wanted done before it would happen in reality.

What needed to be done most of all? The arteries had to be sealed, and that meant first moving the bone. He closed his eyes and used the information coming from his fingertips to imagine the inside of Shilly's shattered thigh. The femur had cracked *there*; one splinter went up, another down; the end poking through the wound led to her hip and would have to be retracted before the others could join it. The big veins, surging feebly now against his grip, could reconnect if he pushed them *this* way ...

At the first movement of bone and tissue beneath his fingers, he almost let go in fright. Opening his eyes, he caught a faint orange aura dancing across Shilly's flesh — but it was gone as soon as he saw it. The bone stopped moving at the same time, and he closed his eyes to regain his concentration.

Once he had it, the bone retracted smoothly into the wound. Shilly stirred as her leg straightened of its own

accord. The jagged splinters lined up and the severed ends of the arteries met.

Sal had the wound completely closed beneath his hands by then, despite the slipperiness of her skin and the strength draining from his fingers, but the blood was still flowing freely. Putting the ends of the arteries together wasn't enough. He would have to fuse them.

He was seeing stars again by this point. He dug deeper and *willed* the ends shut. A brief flower of energy blossomed beneath his palms, inside Shilly's leg, then he was drained, empty. Dizziness rushed through him, and he couldn't stop himself falling down into the grey void that had waited for him all his life.

(And all he heard for an endless instant was the hum that lay behind everything: every thought, every word, every meaning, and every *life*. It was deep and resonant, and drew him into it like the water had drawn him down into the ocean in Fundelry when he had fallen off the jetty — but this time there was no one there to call him back.)

Tap-tap.

Sal stirred. "Huh?"

Tap-tap.

Cold air and a feeling of space rushed over him, as though he was lying near a great emptiness that threatened to engulf him. He sat upright with a jerk. Everything was black, or seemed so at first. What had happened and where he was came to him in fragments: the Old Line, the ravine, the buggy, the bridge. Night had fallen and, apart from a band of stars far above him, the world was utterly dark. There was no moon. He had been unconscious for hours.

"Shilly?" He reached out for her and found her arm

beside him. It was warm and she had a pulse. Her breath came evenly out of the darkness. Reaching lower he found the wound on her thigh. Blood still trickled from it, and it would need to be sewn shut with the needle and thread in the buggy's tool kit, but the bleeding was nothing like the mortal torrent that had poured out of it before. It hadn't killed her. The Change had saved her. *He* had saved her. They had saved each other.

He rose to his hands and knees and felt through the darkness for the buggy, wary of losing it and accidentally crawling over the edge of the ravine. When he found it, he collapsed into the driver's seat and reached under it for the torch in its recharge clip. Yellow light spilled out of the end of it when he flicked the switch, illuminating the scene around him.

Shilly lay on her back where she had fallen in a wash of dried blood. Her right leg needed splinting immediately. He didn't have the strength to seal the breaks; the artery alone had drained him nearly dry.

Out of the darkness, he seemed to hear Lodo's voice, cautioning him: *"Having the Change won't give you access to boundless reserves of energy. All you have is as much as you are, and no more. Take too much, and you risk losing yourself. You'd become like a ghost, or the opposite of a ghost: a body without true life, a shell of yourself, a golem, as some call them. Many wardens and mages have fallen into this trap over the centuries and some still exist. They can be dangerous, for empty vessels may be filled with other things."*

Sal wondered, as he prepared the material necessary for a splint, how close he had come to dipping too deeply — and he contemplated how much harder it was to heal

than to harm. The destructive burst he had sent against the Alcaide and the Syndic in Fundelry hadn't drained him anywhere near as much as shifting bone and fusing two ends of a severed artery.

Tap-tap.

He froze, realising only then what had woken him. The words that had come in response to his desperate plea for help came vividly to his mind. Now he knew from whom they had come, too. His urgency, his desperation when Shilly had been dying in front of him, must have been as obvious as a volcano to anyone looking. And there *had* been someone looking: Shom Behenna. Sal had exposed himself by using the Change out in the open. This, he knew, was how his parents had given themselves away when on the run from Highson Sparre. The Change stood out more clearly than a fire at night for those who could see, his father had said. He would have to be more careful in future, if it wasn't already far too late.

But he put it out of his mind for the moment. There were no words any more from the distant Sky Warden, and Shilly needed him to concentrate on her, not Behenna. Her battered leg was purple and swollen, and at risk of infection. If he could splint it and get her in the buggy, they could move on. Out of the hills there would be more ground cover, more medicinal plants. Even if he couldn't find the right ones, there was always Yor, the next town on their journey. If he moved quickly enough, they might yet stay ahead of pursuit. The fact that he couldn't feel the eye of the Syndic pressing down upon him gave him some small hope.

When Shilly's leg was bound, he carried her as gently as

he could to the buggy and put her on the tray. The sweet, rosemary smell which was usually part of her was completely buried under the stench of blood. He rearranged their supplies to give her room and laid out the tarp to act as a makeshift cushion around her. The less he jarred her leg, the better.

Only then did he get into the driver's seat and try the ignition. The engine caught immediately. Letting go of the breath he had been holding he performed a careful three-point turn, then headed off down the Old Line and left the ravine far behind him.

Bright light burned through Shilly's eyelids.

It can't be, she thought. The last thing she remembered was the shadow of the ravine. *I'm dreaming.*

She tried opening her eyes and was assaulted by sensations: light, stronger than before; the sound of the buggy rattling and roaring along a road of some kind; the taste of dust and blood in her mouth, and —

She shouldn't have tried to move. She remembered that much the next time she awoke. The pain in her leg was too big to contain. It overwhelmed her, thrust her back into the darkness. But the darkness held despair and nightmares of failure. *We didn't make it, did we?*

There was no answer. She couldn't tell if she was speaking or not, but she reached outward anyway.

Sal?

Instantly, the buggy braked and pulled over. She heard the sound of scrabbling. A shadow fell across her face. Her eyelids were stuck together, and she forced them open with an effort.

"Are you awake?" Sal asked. He was a blur looming over

her, silhouetted against the bright, blue sky. She felt his hand on her forehead. "Can you hear me?"

She nodded, although the effort made her fragile grip on consciousness waver. Her stomach churned as though she was about to be sick.

He removed his hand. "I thought you were going to die." His face conveyed an almost comical mix of hope and dismay. "Your leg — can you feel it?"

She nodded again, and *was* sick, then. The nausea and the pain fought for control of her world until the darkness stepped in once more and claimed her for its own.

The next time she awoke, everything was dark and cool behind her closed eyelids. The smell of the road was gone, replaced by a pungent odour of herbs and ointments. She was lying on a bed, covered with a soft sheet. Her clothes were gone, and any embarrassment she might have felt was quashed by the sensation of being clean for the first time in days. Her hair was wet and cool against her scalp.

Her thoughts were clear enough to deduce that she had been stripped and bathed while she was unconscious. By Sal? He couldn't move her on his own, not with her leg ...

Her leg! She tried to feel it, but could not. It was numb. *Gone?* Panic subsided when her fingertips found her thigh and followed it as far as she could. There was bandage, a splint. *They wouldn't splint a stump, would they?*

She collapsed back onto the bed, groggy and exhausted, and full of smaller aches. Cool air wafted over her in gentle waves. Wherever she was, she was glad to be off the road. If only, she thought, she could stay there forever ...

After a while, she became aware of voices talking softly in a room nearby.

“... good food, painkillers, antibiotics, fresh bandages. Most of all she needs time: time to rest, to heal, to get better.”

The man’s speech was accented in a way she had heard sometimes in market traders, as though they were speaking a slightly different language. Then someone else spoke and, although she couldn’t make out the words, she recognised Sal’s voice. A trickle of relief ran through her.

“That much is obvious,” said the accented voice in response to what Sal had said, “but even the strongest won’t recover overnight.”

“We don’t have time,” Sal said, more loudly. “We have to get moving again, and soon.”

“Well, I could supply you with what you will need, I suppose. It will be expensive.”

“I don’t have any money left. You know that.”

“I do know that, Tom, and I have already given you more than you could afford. I am a reasonable man. I will let you stay here longer in order to help Elina. But I am not a saint. If you leave, I will not be able to help you.”

Shilly was momentarily confused over the names. The reason for them came back to her only slowly through the fog in her head. In order to preserve their anonymity, she and Sal were travelling under assumed identities. The real Elina was a young girl in Fundelry with a sputtering of talent that would burn itself out before she turned five, just as Shilly’s had. The real Tom had applied for Selection in order to follow his brother, but had helped her and Sal escape when his devotion had been betrayed. Shilly had no idea what had happened to them in the wake of the visit of the Alcaide and Syndic to their tiny village. Their names

felt odd through her disorientation, and the memories came with a deep sense of sadness and loss.

Again Sal said something she couldn't hear properly. When the man spoke next his voice was gentler.

"I don't know, Tom. We've done everything we can. With proper care, the bones should knit well. Her thigh's as straight as anyone could make it, I guarantee you that. Given time and rest, I think she will walk again in three months."

"If not?"

The older voice hesitated. "You must understand that when I say that she will only walk given time and rest, I do not mean that she will be the same as she was. She has been seriously injured. There will be consequences. She will have a limp for the rest of her life, for starters. The risk of another break will be high. Walking might be the most she will ever do. If she *doesn't* get the time and rest, well..." Shilly heard a silence that might have been filled with a shrug. "It's a hard road to the Lookout. If you don't undo all the work I have done and she doesn't lose the leg entirely, my guess is that she will be lamed. Crippled. Do you want to risk that?"

"No." There was a slight edge of desperation to Sal's voice that sent more of a chill through her than even the word *crippled* had. "And that's what I thought you were going to say."

The older man sighed heavily. "It's not that I don't sympathise, Tom —"

"No, Engenius, I know you do. But there's nothing else you can do. I'm more grateful for what you have done than I can say. It's not your fault I don't like where that leaves me."

There was silence for a moment, then the rattling of beads in a doorway. Shilly sensed someone in the room with her, and she opened her eyes.

The first thing she saw was a fan circling overhead, stirring the air in the shadowed room. The walls were wood-panelled and carved in the likeness of animals she had never seen before. There were birds, beasts, reptiles, insects — a dizzying panorama that distracted her from the room's contents. Perhaps that was the idea. When she did notice, she saw gleaming knives, extra-long tweezers, silver pans and clamps next to a black leather bag that was old, but had been lovingly cared for. She was in some sort of surgery.

Sal stepped slowly into view, bending at the waist to look at her face. For all the attention she had received, he hadn't wasted any on himself. He was filthy, covered in red dust across every visible inch of skin. His clothes were torn and stained brown with dried blood. He looked like he hadn't slept for days.

"You're awake," he said, and she couldn't tell if he was relieved or annoyed.

The best she could manage in reply was a croak. Her mouth was parched. Sal put a tube into her mouth. The other end dipped into a glass of water and she sipped eagerly.

He looked worried. "How much did you hear?"

"You..." She stopped, then tried again. "You were going to leave me here, weren't you?"

His exhaustion didn't cover the surprise on his face. "What? No, Shilly, of course not."

But he was lying. She could tell that. He had come into the room to say goodbye while she slept.

“Would you have come back?”

He warred silently with himself for a moment, then said: “Yes.”

Even though she had guessed, the sense of betrayal surprised her. What had happened to *together*?

“Don’t go without me,” she said. “Don’t leave me here alone.”

“I don’t want to, but —”

“Just don’t. We had a deal, didn’t we?”

“Your leg —”

“I’m going to have a limp even if I stay here. Isn’t that what he said? The chances are I won’t be any worse off in the buggy. We can use the Ch—”

He put a hand across her mouth before she could finish the word and looked, alarmed, back through the beaded doorway. “Not here,” he hissed. “I haven’t told anyone about that.”

She nodded, flushing at her lack of thought, and he took his hand away.

“Yes,” he said. “I’ve thought of that, but I didn’t want to leave you with no other option.”

“What’s the difference between that and abandoning me here?”

“I would have come back, really.”

“If they didn’t catch you first. Or me. What if you walked back into a trap? Did you think of that?”

He shook his head. If she had thought he looked older during the crossing of the ravine, he looked young and vulnerable again now.

“I don’t think I can stay awake much longer,” she said. And it was the truth. Whatever was keeping her leg numb

was also having an effect on her mind. Her vision kept blurring no matter how hard she tried to keep it clear.

“Engenius?” Sal called. The beads rattled again, and a large, white-skinned man walked into the room. His hair and beard were grey and close-cropped. His eyes were concerned.

“You’re sleepy?” he said. “Don’t fight it, princess. It will make you strong.”

Princess? No one had ever called her anything like that before. She wanted to ask him who he was, but the words wouldn’t come.

Sal leaned close. “I won’t go,” he said. “I’ll be here when you wake up. I promise.”

She couldn’t tell if he was lying or not this time, but had no choice but to let him go. His face receded to the end of a long, dark tunnel, then he vanished from sight.

Engenius Lutz was the only surgeon in Yor, and therefore the only surgeon for many hundreds of kilometres. He dressed in grey smocks that hung to his knees, regardless of the temperature, and his breath smelled of the yukuri fruit Sal had used to soothe her headache. So she learned the next day, when she woke to see her leg unbound for the first time. The sight of it appalled her — a mass of bruised flesh, all yellow and purple, looking less like a part of her than a side of meat left out in the sun too long. To take her mind off the pain, Lutz told her about how she had come to him. She had assumed that Sal knew of the surgeon from his previous travels, but Lutz explained how Sal had roared into town during the town’s afternoon siesta the previous day, honking his horn and bellowing for a doctor at the top of his lungs.

“He shook things up, let me tell you. Wouldn’t take no for an answer. People will talk about it for years.”

Which was exactly what Sal was afraid of, she knew. The fewer people who knew about them, the better. At least the buggy wasn’t as much of an oddity as it had been in Fundelry. She heard the burbling of several similar vehicles in the street outside.

“He told me what you did on the bridge,” the surgeon said, looking down at her from a great height. His face was broad and well rounded, as though moulded out of clay. “That was quick thinking, princess. You were very brave.”

Was I? she thought. She’d never considered herself brave before. She’d just done what she had to do. If that was all it took, then it was easier than she’d thought.

She blacked out again when he rebound her leg, but woke feeling better some hours later. There was a grey-haired old woman in the room, cleaning. She paid no attention to Shilly at all as she dusted in the corners and took away the old bandages. The tune she hummed was soothing and lulled Shilly back to sleep, even though she fought it. She was spending too much time asleep. They were losing ground.

The next time she woke, it was night, and Sal explained that the old woman was Lutz’s mother. His clothes had been washed since Shilly had last seen him. He was almost looking clean, if a little rough around the edges.

“We need to leave here,” she said.

“I know. Lutz won’t let us go until tomorrow, and even then he’s reluctant. I don’t want to push him. He knows more about this than I do, after all.”

“It’s *my* leg,” she said, “and I decide what to do with it.”

“Yes,” he agreed, “but you’re not really in a fit state to make decisions, are you? Look at you. You can hardly keep your eyes open.”

She was about to argue, but she truly didn’t have the energy. He was right: the last thing she wanted to do was go anywhere.

“Tomorrow, then. You promise?”

“I promise. We’ll have you out of here before you can say ‘apothecary.’”

“Say what?”

He smiled and answered her, but she only saw his lips move. Sense by sense, the world drifted away, and she slept deeply, dreaming of great purple clouds that hung swollen and heavy above a land already drenched with pain.

Lutz helped Sal prepare a seat for Shilly in the back of the buggy, his features painted pink by the dawn sunlight. The big man folded the sleeping bag so it would support her back. There wasn’t enough room to lie full-length comfortably, so she would have to sit partially upright all the time, no matter how ill she felt. Her leg would be supported on water and fuel containers, suspended in front of her like a jetty jutting out from shore.

“I strongly advise against this,” said Engenius Lutz for the fifth time that morning, his wide face set in a lumpy frown.

“I know.” Sal lashed down the tarpaulin. He had washed again while she slept, and looked rested. “But we have no choice.”

“Perhaps if I came with you —”

“I’m sorry, Engenius. We’ve got to make it on our own. We have a long way left to go.”

The Sky Warden and the Sun

This was Shilly's first proper glimpse of Yor. The town consisted of a collection of sun-bleached houses on either side of a gravel road leading straight as an arrow into the town and beyond it. It was much smaller than she had imagined, little more than a place to water camels or refuel after a long journey. What exactly the countryside around it consisted of, she couldn't see, but she could smell it. The air was rich with an odour she associated with some of Lodo's more arcane experiments: harsh and tangy, vaguely distasteful. A constant haze of dust, kicked up by wheels and hoofs, hung thick in the lazy air, making her eyes water.

The thought of Lodo made her sad again, but she put aside the emotion. There were more immediate things to worry about.

The surgeon shook his head heavily. "I am a simple man, Tom. I have no concern for anything but the wellbeing of my patients. That leg, in this instance. I don't care who you're running from or what you might have done to deserve it, but I will say this: in order to make your journey easier, I'll do my best to ensure that you aren't followed."

Sal glanced up from his knots. "Thank you," he said. "You don't have to do that."

"I do. Gentle travel may make all the difference." He looked up the road at a surly cluster of people watching from the shade of the general store's verandah. "I can't say, though, that everyone will share my opinion."

Sal nodded soberly, and together they helped Shilly into her improvised seat. She bit her lip as her leg was moved. They tried to be gentle but the pain was sudden and sharp, like red-hot knives twisting in her bones.

When she was settled, Lutz pressed a small jar of tablets

into her hand. “For the pain, princess.”

“I’ll be fine,” she snapped in reply. Hurt throbbed through her, making everything difficult.

Lutz backed away and watched from the shade as Sal started the buggy’s engine.

“Drive well!” the surgeon called over the sound of the engine. His expression was concerned — and something else too. Jealous, perhaps. Shilly couldn’t define it.

“I will.” Sal raised a hand in farewell. Dented and dirty, the battered vehicle drove off in a cloud of white dust.

Shilly waved at the doctor and his grey-haired, hunched mother. She was glad they were on their way again, but she was sad to be leaving. Lutz had been kind and persistent in his treatment; she would miss that security on the road ahead. There was a certain amount of confusion about it, too. She had missed a lot of the previous day and two nights, including the mad dash from the ravine down to Yor, and the resetting of her leg. It seemed strange to her that they were going already, when from her point of view they had only just arrived. That was just an illusion, she knew, and staying longer simply wasn’t an option. The town itself would have to be a missing piece of their journey for her.

Not a large piece, she gathered. From her vantage point, she could see that the town was being slowly eaten away by the elements. There was no grass, no trees, no green at all. Everything was dead. How, she wondered, could people live there?

“We’re in the Broken Lands now,” Sal said as he drove up the main road. “Yor is the gateway. Do you remember my dad saying that he’d buried my body here, when the

Alcaide questioned him in Fundelry?”

“Yes.” She thought she did, although she was still trying not to think about the past.

“We always had to come here, to refuel and pick up water, but I wasn’t intending to make such a dramatic entrance.”

They passed a dozen houses, a camel pen containing six of the tall, curious beasts, and went through a rusty gate. *Not much of a gateway*, she thought. Beyond that was only road — if it could be called that. The level, white surface that had led through the small town soon became a heavily rutted track winding through deep red soil. It led perfectly north as far as she could see over a landscape as flat as anything she had ever experienced. On the horizon ahead she could see what looked like hills, but the shimmer in the air made them hard to discern. They could have been anything: buildings, trees, mirages. On her right, a ghostly willy-willy whirled the red dust into the sky like a snake.

Sal had the map unfolded next to him, in the passenger seat. Shilly couldn’t quite see it.

“Do you know where we’re going?”

“We’re heading for a place called the Lookout,” he explained. “It’s on the far side of the Broken Lands but on this side of the Divide. That’s where we cross — to Nesh on the other side. From that point on, we’ll be in the Interior. Where exactly we’ll go then, I’m not sure. We’ll have fewer options than we do in the Strand. The Stone Mages prefer cities to villages, so there will be fewer places to look. That could make it easier or harder.”

She couldn’t imagine what it would be like, so she tried

to concentrate on the immediate future. “What are the Broken Lands?”

“I don’t know, exactly,” Sal replied without turning his head. His attention was on the road, avoiding sudden dips or bumps. Even so, the buggy lurched all too frequently, jolting her leg. “I always thought of it as something like a Ruin, but I’m not picking up any background potential. It’s just — there.”

“What is?”

“You’ll see. It’s not all like this.”

“I hope not.” Yor lay behind them, swallowed by the cloud of dust they left in their wake. Her eyes could discern no detail on the terrible, flat plain — except for the enigmatic shapes far ahead. Above the horizon the sun was already burning fiercely, blinding her and boiling her at the same time. “Do we have to go through them?”

He nodded. “This is the safest and most direct route to the Lookout. The Broken Lands stretch almost two thousand kilometres from side to side, so to go around would take forever. Luckily they’re narrower across than they are wide. At this point, they’re only two hundred kilometres across.”

She was relieved to hear that. “It shouldn’t take us long, then.”

“It’s not all as easy as this.”

“You call this easy?”

“Compared to what’s ahead, yes. I’ve never driven it myself. I only watched while Dad did it.” Sal was silent for a moment, then said: “I’m thinking at least two days.”

She winced as the buggy tipped suddenly to one side then righted itself. The track’s narrowness and roughness

implied that it wasn't designed for motorised traffic. She saw occasional black patches on the ground as they passed by, where caravans had camped on the outskirts of Yor. But for her leg, a camel would have been much more comfortable, she thought.

The buggy lurched again and, despite her determination not to, she reached for the vial of pills Engenius Lutz had given her. Taking one of the rough, white tablets, she washed it down with a swig of water.

"It's weird," Sal said, "coming back here without my father."

Shilly couldn't tell if Sal was addressing her or just himself, but she was happy to let him talk.

"The last time we came this way, we were caught in a storm. It was amazing. The sky was black with clouds and the rain was hot and thick, like taking a shower. We couldn't drive in it; had to stop and wait it out and move on when it was over. But that wasn't the worst of it. The ground isn't good at holding water here, so the road was swept away in places, and then we came across a caravan that had been caught in a flash flood. They lost five people and two camels. We carried some of their goods in exchange for a room at Yor. Later, we heard that another caravan had been struck by lightning. The leader, a woman named Diamond Fargher, was someone we knew from the borderlands. She was hit when she was in the open and it instantly stopped her heart. Her team carried her body until the water subsided and buried her out here, somewhere. It'd be a lonely place to rest, that's for sure ..."

Shilly's eyes drifted upward, to the sky. It was blue and flawless, apart from the sun. She couldn't imagine it as Sal

had described it: cloudy from horizon to horizon, teeming with rain. But she didn't disbelieve him. He wasn't the sort to exaggerate simply to impress her.

She wanted to ask him about the Divide and the Lookout, but her thoughts were clouded and her mouth wouldn't move properly. The pain had receded into the distance and she was grateful for that, but the brief memory of Yor was fading with it and she wanted to scream that it wasn't fair; couldn't she keep her mind without the pain? Why did it have to be one or the other?

The buggy moved in slow motion, rocking her gently as though floating on the sea. Sal was talking again. The words meant nothing. She couldn't sleep, but she dreamed that they had been travelling forever on a giant, bone-white ship across a desert sea. The water ran out before they got where they were going, though, and they were marooned in the middle of nowhere. The sun baked the soil rock hard, locking the ship tight in the ground. They couldn't move. She jumped out of the boat and tried to dig it free, cursing all the while, determined not to be held up a moment longer. She was late, and getting later with every minute.

The fat, blistering sun turned ponderously across the sky and descended to the opposite horizon, which for some reason was as irregular as the teeth in an ancient skull. In the darkness she could hear the wind whistling through the ravine, and felt again the awful moment of panic as the buggy had leapt forward with her sprawled across it. The crack of bone between metal and concrete snapped her back to full consciousness with a start.

"Are you all right?"

Shilly looked around, confused. It was night, and they

had stopped. The buggy was off the track, sheltered behind a ruined masonry wall. The horizon on the other side matched the one in her dream perfectly.

When had the world gone from being flat to rugged again? She couldn't remember. But she wasn't still dreaming; she was sure of it. Although her head was fuzzy, her thoughts were clear.

"Just a nightmare," the voice decided. She looked up at its source. Sal was leaning over her, a half-smile making light of his concern. She nodded, knowing that the memories of the ravine would be with her forever, along with the scars. No matter what else she forgot in the long, arduous journey, that would never fade.

"Don't let me take any more of those tablets," she said. "I feel terrible."

"How's your leg?"

"Don't ask. Do I have to stay up here?" She was still slumped in the makeshift bed on the back of the buggy. Her back was aching.

"I'll get you down later. First I want to make a fire and put some food on. You need to eat to get better."

"Is that why we stopped?"

"No. The road is too bad to drive on at night. We got bogged once already."

She frowned, a vague memory of him cursing the spinning wheels drifting out of the vagueness then sinking back down again. With the memory came more images that clashed with the desert surrounding Yor. Images of crumbling riverbanks, flat boulders and shattered rock, through and over which the track wound like a snake.

"Where are we?"

“About fifty kilometres into the Broken Lands. We made good time until the last stretch. It’s even rougher than I remember.” He clambered down off the tray and began to unpack supplies. “If you want to do something, you can peel these.”

He handed her a knife and some wizened, yellow, root vegetables. She took them, relieved that she wouldn’t have to sit and watch him do everything. They were supposed to be working as a team; at some point she would have to start fulfilling her end of the deal.

When a simple stew was boiling in the pot, he helped her hop awkwardly off the tray and onto the ground. The shock of landing reverberated through her broken leg and she bit her lip to avoid crying out. He talked with unnatural animation about the wildlife he’d seen on the road while she relieved herself, leaning on him for support and not hearing a word he was saying until she was relatively comfortable by the fire. The smell of cooking was a great improvement on the pungent odour of the countryside; whatever it was, the odour was stronger than it had been at Yor and nagged at her like an itch.

They were silent as they ate their meal. She could feel the reticence of the early stages of their journey creeping back over her again, but this time she fought it. They needed to talk to each other if they were going to keep travelling together, and most of what she *needed* to say boiled down to one phrase, one she had always found difficult to say.

It finally came out when dinner was over and the fire was winding down. They were sitting opposite each other. His eyes reflected the orange light back at her.

“I want to say thank you, Sal,” she said.

The Sky Warden and the Sun

He looked startled. “What for?”

“You know.” The words came only awkwardly. “For saving my life.”

“You saved mine too.”

“That was just a reflex. I didn’t think about it. You went to a lot of trouble and took a great deal of risk to —”

“You don’t have to thank me, Shilly. You shouldn’t. I don’t deserve it.” He looked distinctly uncomfortable.

“Why not?”

“It’s just ...”

“It’s what, Sal?”

“Let’s just say we’re even. We saved each other. That’s enough, isn’t it?” He shifted restlessly. “I mean, I crashed the buggy, I dragged you away from Fundelry, I got you into trouble with the Sky Wardens —”

“And we’re trying to fix all that, together. You didn’t have to take me with you. Thanks for giving me a chance.”

“Neither of us really has a choice,” he said. “We’re sort of stuck with each other.”

“True. So it would be stupid to fight about who owes whom for what. We should just be grateful in general.”

“I agree,” he said. “Maybe this is what Lodo meant when he said we were ‘destined.’ Destined to help each other through this, as much as we can.”

She thought about that, as she’d thought about it many times during the previous weeks. “I don’t know,” she eventually said. “It could be.”

He nodded. “I can’t see how he could know about anything else. We’re just kids, really. The future could hold anything.”

Shilly studied him in the fading firelight and wondered

who he was trying to reassure the most: himself, or her. They were both still young, it was true, but they were on their own and were being forced to grow up fast. She could see it in him, at times, and on his face: the man he would one day become. She didn't know if he could see similar changes in her: she was older, so the difference wouldn't be so obvious. His voice hadn't broken yet. He had further to catch up.

He was right, though. Anything *could* happen. But that wasn't what she'd wanted to talk about. Far from it. She could feel herself flushing with embarrassment in the darkness and clutched at anything to change the subject.

"How long until we reach the Desert Ports?"

"A week, maybe two." He sounded relieved at the shift too. "It depends on how we get on at the Lookout and Nesh. Even if there's no one waiting for us there, we'll still have to talk our way through."

"Do you know how we're going to do that?"

"Not yet." He surprised them both with a sudden yawn. "Sorry," he said, stretching out and lying back on the sleeping bag with his hands beneath his head. "Don't worry, Shilly. I'm sure we'll think of something."

She nodded because she had to believe him. This was his territory, not hers. What little she knew about the borderlands came from Mrs Milka, Fundelry's only Schoolteacher, and she didn't trust a lot of that. The official line was that the Stone Mages of the Interior and the Sky Wardens of the Strand co-existed in harmony, having very little in common except a small amount of trade. Shilly was sure it wasn't so simple, or innocent. Sal himself was proof of that, if she needed any: a child born out of a mixed,

political union who had spent most of his life between both countries, in neither one nor the other. He couldn't be the only one.

Maybe that was where the inhabitants of Yor fitted in. If someone didn't belong in either the Strand or the Interior, but didn't want to travel, there might be few places left to live. Even an isolated, derelict town would be better than nothing — and might even give someone a sense of purpose. Someone like Engenius Lutz could be important where medical help was hard to find.

She felt vaguely sorry, then, for the man who had healed her. He had saved her leg at least, if not her life. It didn't seem fair to her that *anyone* should be forced out into the fringes: Lutz, Sal, or her. But perhaps there was a reason she knew nothing about.

She lay back to watch the stars. They were brilliantly depthless, perfect for taking her mind off her worries and the pain in her leg, and her uncertain memories of all the things waiting for her in the Interior: the Advisory Synod, the Judges, the Nine Stars. At least one thing was behind her, even if her memories of that were even more uncertain and hazy. She wouldn't be unhappy if she never saw Yor again.

“Have you ever —?” she started to say, but stopped upon seeing that Sal was asleep. She went back to looking at the stars and wondering at the strange, angular nature of the northern horizon, determined to keep watch while he rested. Without taking one of Lutz's potent little pills, she doubted she would sleep anyway. She had had far too much of it lately, enough for a lifetime.

So it came as a surprise, deep in the night, to be startled

awake by the sound of another vehicle chugging toward them along the track, glimmers of light from its headlamps shining around the masonry they were sheltering behind. It was even more of a shock to hear it slow as it grew near. Shilly automatically tried to sit up, but every nerve in her leg cried out in protest.

The last vestiges of sleep vanished when she heard the vehicle rattle to a halt and two men speak softly over the chugging of the motor.

remembered in a flash Lutz's promise to deflect any pursuit if he could, and his glance at the cheerless group of villagers further along Yor's only road. There was only one conclusion she could come to.

"Sal!" she hissed. "Sal, wake up! Someone's here! They've found us!"

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Sal's life has been thrown into turmoil.

Homeless and haunted by a past he never suspected he had, he is unsure where he is running to — but Shilly is very clear on what she wants. She wants to find Lodo's old teacher and learn from him. To search for the Mage Van Haasteren they must head north to the Interior, where Sal's mother was born. But even if they reach the Interior there is no guarantee that the Stone Mages will help them.

The journey over rugged mountainous country on the Old Line is dangerous and the Sky Warden, Shom Behenna, is in hot pursuit. It will take all their ingenuity and courage to reach the Divide and get across to the other side ...



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