WORLD WEAVERS

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For Buffy and for Ruth –
Not-So-Quiet Sisters

PART ONE

THE BOOK OF SHADOW

Kid tracks the waythread west, until he crosses to a raggedy world.

Above him, twin suns burn like a pair of red unblinking eyes. There's not much left beneath their bloodshot gaze. The wind blows through the scorched grass and the dust devils upon the highways. The endless ashen slopes lie stubbled with the charred stumps of pine trees. The ranches are burned down and silent, their barns and houses all empty as skulls. People used to live here. Now there's only Kid.

He's been on this waythread's trail for a long, long time. Every step's an effort now. His boots are full of blisters and his shirt soaked with sweat. The thirst pounds in his head and rakes its nails down his throat. No water in this place, and Kid's own supply ran dry a few worlds back. Ever since then, he's been forced to pattern.

Dropping to his knees, he scoops up a handful of ground from beneath his boots. The rust-red dust is heaped with odd bits of coloured plastic trash. Curls and chunks and twists of it, like fossils of ancient plankton. Kid sits in the shade of a boulder and picks all them bits out carefully. Then he closes his eyes. He has to close his eyes before he can pattern. All world weavers do.

Kid takes hold of the tiny thing that he wears holstered

in the crook of his left arm, and slips it over the tip of his forefinger.

It looks just like a thimble. Exactly like a thimble.

As soon as it's on, Kid can see the dust in his hand. His mind holds the pattern of it, the way a loom holds thread. His thimbled fingertip twitches as he sets to work upon it, unravelling and reweaving its shape, thread by thread, turning its pattern from hot to cold, from dry to wet, from dust to water.

Kid opens his eyes again and sees it welling from his hand, clear and cold as a spring.

He drinks in deep gulps. Wetness runs down his chin. Then he rinses the dust from his mouth and turns his head and spits and it lands on a rock under the suns and sizzles like an egg in a pan. He patterns more handfuls, splashes the water over his suns-burned face. He wipes his wet hands in his hair and then he stands up and feels beads of it dribbling down his neck and soaking into his collar and drying almost instantly.

When Kid's done, he points the thimble at the ground, sweeping his finger back and forth as he feels around again for the waythread. It shimmers in and out of sight like a mirage in the heat, until finally Kid catches it again and pins it down beneath his boots. The waythread is a shining ribbon of silver, the width of a little finger and the colour and sheen of moonlit water. It runs through the dust like a rivulet, heading west, heading further than west, all the way beyond this world, and all the way to the Quiet sisters.

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Later that afternoon the first shift comes on the wind. Kid stops walking and breathes it in. There's a smell of spring blossom and warm rain and wet grass. A scent not of this world but of the world that is to come, carried on a wind that weaves across two places and two patterns. The waythread is leading him out of this world and shifting him into the next. Perhaps this one will hold the sisters.

Pebbles slide down a slope behind him. Kid whirls around, the forefinger of his right hand quickly slipping on his thimble. He points his finger like a pistol and sweeps the hills with his eyes closed.

There's nothing. Just this world sliding further into ruin and dust. Must've been the breeze that moved them. But Kid's hand still tingles and his heart beats hard. If a breeze can cross over into this pattern then so can other things.

Further on, the waythread weaves around a vast scattering of boulders, all of them smooth and pink-speckled, like prehistoric eggs. As Kid passes by, some of those pink spots tremor and shed from the rock and flutter in the air like the ghosts of butterflies.

He kneels down and picks one of them up. They are blossom petals. From trees that did not bloom in this world. Kid nods. He smiles, even though smiling makes his cracked lips bleed. He's very close now.

He'll need to rest before the final shift. He hasn't slept or stopped in almost two days and he is beyond exhausted. His feet are blistered raw and his skin is scoured by the dust and burned by the suns and his head aches from the constant

effort of tracking the waythread. He steps off it carefully and closes his eyes to watch its quicksilver gleam drain down into the dust again.

That evening he sits by his campfire and watches the flames of it stream upwards in orange ribbons tinged with green. When he needs more wood he weaves it out of the dust and tosses it inside the circle of stones. Above him the two suns slip away one after the other until night comes, starless and cold. All constellations here long since burned out like old lightbulbs. The fire is the only thing shining in all this vast and desolate world.

Sometimes blossom petals drift into light and vanish away again into the dark. Kid hunches up with his arms around his knees and shuffles closer to the flames. He slips on his thimble and from the rising smoke he weaves himself a blanket, thickening it in the air with his finger like candyfloss on a stick. He reaches out and pulls it around his shoulders and shivers until he's warm.

He badly needs to sleep but he's afraid. The dark is all around him, so deep it is like something he might fall into and drown. And not all of it is night-time dark. There is another darkness out here, as there is in all worlds gone raggedy. It is a darkness Kid can feel whenever he closes his eyes. A darkness that is bleeding through from the place beyond the pattern, until it clots like a scab into some horrendous thing, with teeth and a sucking mouth and dark pinhole eyes.

The blanket has warmed Kid but he is still shaking. His

fear is the kind of fear that grows deep down, like cancer in a bone. It burrows and it gnaws and he can't make it stop. He slips on his thimble and points a trembling finger at the darkness. At last his arm drops and Kid shakes his head. He needs rest. He needs to get his strength back for the last stretch of waythread. Can't be staring wide-eyed into the dark all night. Someone else'll have to do that for him.

With the thimble still on his forefinger, Kid looks around for something to pattern. Turns to the boulder nearest to him. It's rough and reddish and not too big. It'll do.

Closing his eyes, Kid gets to working. Begins to weave and quicken the stone. Until the boulder shudders and grunts and shakes off the blossom petals atop it. And all the while, beyond the firelight, the darkness blots and clots and thickens.

'Hello,' Kid says to the pattern he has made. 'I'm Kid.'

The rock sits up in the light of the fire and blinks its dark round eyes.

'I know!' it says happily. 'And I am your best friend.'

Kid is grinning. He's done it. Actually done it. Woven a living thing out of the stone. He wasn't sure if this world's pattern would let him, but it has. The rock is now this copper-coloured furry creature, with a long blunt face with little round ears on top of its head and a few short whiskers. It looks cute and kind of fierce and very, very friendly.

'What's your name?' he asks it.

His new friend stands up on hind legs. Tall as Kid's knees or thereabouts.

'My name,' it decides, 'is Crockett. Because you can't spell Crockett without rock in it, and you can't make a me unless you've got a rock too.'

Kid's grin is a grin with a chuckle now. 'That's smart. I like that.'

'And I like you. And I like your smile and your very nice teeth and I don't even care that they are a bit wonky.'

Kid laughs. He is not ashamed to admit that he is beyond pleased with how Crockett has turned out. In all honesty, he intended to pattern a dog, but somehow he has ended up with something much better. He watches his new friend comb through its reddish fur with little black paws and notice things about itself.

'My name is Crockett,' it says again. 'And I am a boy, I think?'

Kid shrugs beneath his blanket. 'That's up to you.'

'And I am three minutes old, and I am a best friend to a kid with no memory.'

'I've got a memory,' Kid says, a little more defensively than he meant to. 'It just . . . doesn't go back very far.'

'My memory only goes back to three minutes ago.' Crockett wrinkles up his nose and thinks some more. 'Although, I know some things from before that. Like words and how to speak them and what they mean.'

Kid nods. 'That's right. I wove that knowing into you. It comes from me.'

'It comes from you,' Crockett repeats. 'That is why I am not sure how I feel about some of the things that you have

given me to know about. Like, what is my favourite song? Do I like Tuesdays?'

Kid looks away into the world beyond the fire. 'That's how it is with me too,' he says softly.

Crockett beams. 'We have so much in common! It is no wonder we are best friends. But Kid, why have you forgotten all about yourself? What world are you from? Who are your family? Where are they?'

'I don't think I've forgotten, Crockett. I think I'm like you. I think I've been made, not born.'

'Someone patterned you, the way you patterned me?'

Kid gives a shrug that says, *I reckon so*.

Crockett lets out an *ohhh* sound. Then looks around the campfire. 'If you're the someone that patterned me,' he says, 'then where's the someone that patterned you?'

Kid chuckles quietly. 'That, I'm not too sure of. You know as much as I do, Crockett.'

'I do?' Crockett tips his furry head from side to side as the knowledge Kid has woven there tumbles and slots into place. 'Oh! I do! You've been woven so you can fetch the Quiet sisters, from whichever world they are in?'

'Yes,' says Kid.

'And help them get back to their mother?'

'Yes,' says Kid.

'Because children need to be with their mothers?'

Kid considers this. 'Most do, yeah.'

Crockett does another *ohhhh*. 'Is this mother the one who wove you?'

'Could be.' Kid rubs at his jaw. His head is mostly gaps. No answers there, just spaces where answers ought to be. He prods at those holes, like a tongue at a gum after a tooth comes out.

Crockett puts his little hands on his hips and wrinkles up his nose. 'Well, it's all very secret.'

'Maybe it has to be. There's a war on, you know.' Kid waves a hand at the dark and ruined world around them, as if to say, *What else do you think did this?*

'The war,' says Crockett softly, remembering. 'Which side are we on?'

'The good side,' Kid says with certainty. 'The side that reunites missing children with their parents.'

'So you are like a spy? And the sisters are your mission?'

Kid nods. He likes that word. *Mission*. Something given to you, that you might not fully understand, but you know you have to do.

Beside him, Crockett stands up straight as a soldier. 'And it's my mission to help you with your mission, because helping is what best friends do! OK?'

Kid grins. 'OK.'

Crockett grins back, then he notices the little leather harness looped around his shoulder, and the ceramic dagger that Kid has patterned there in a scabbard.

'Is this for the baddies out in the dark that might come to kill you in your sleep?' he asks.

'They're not *in* the dark,' Kid tells him. 'They're *made* of dark. But yeah, I need you to guard me in case they come.'

Crockett looks at his knife dubiously. 'Can I not have a machine gun?' he asks. 'Or a bazooka?'

Kid shakes his head. 'Guns don't work that well against them.'

'Not even if it was a bazooka that fires laser-guided missiles and also can it please be made of cake?'

'Cake?' Kid shakes his head a second time. All kinds of weirdness are woven into this little critter.

'Yes,' Crockett confirms. 'Cake. Because once the laser missiles destroy the baddies, I would like to eat some and I think I should be allowed because, if you think about it, today is sort of my birthday.'

Kid shakes his head and grins despite everything. 'How are you making me smile right now?'

'That is the power of a best friend,' Crockett tells him solemnly. 'I can cheer you up no matter what. And your power is that you can make a gun that fires—'

Kid cuts him off. 'Not here, I can't. I can only weave what the world will let me. This isn't the sort of place where laser-missile gun-cakes can exist.'

'Oh.' Crockett lets out a sigh. 'Well, I will still not let them hurt you anyway. I will be guarding whilst you will be snoozing and if any baddies come they will be saying OUCH because my dagger will be poking them in the FACE.' Crockett shouts that last word beyond the fire's reach like a threat.

Kid's chuckle turns into a yawn that nearly topples him over. Now he has someone to watch over him, whatever was

holding back his exhaustion breaks like a dam. He is so, so weary. Rest. He has to rest. Just for a little while. Just until he gets the strength to walk the final stretch of waythread. The last part is always the hardest. The most dangerous.

He snuggles up by the fire and wraps the blanket around his shoulders and slips the thimble over his finger, just in case. He sleeps without dreaming until he is woken by the undoers.

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As Kid bolts up and throws off his blanket, the undoer is just shambling in to the light of the fire. It wears blue worn jeans and scuffed boots and a checked flannel shirt, the same as Kid is wearing. It looks like him in every aspect, apart from its face.

The undoer's face is not a face at all. Just two dark and lidless holes for eyes and a round lipless mouth with yellow inward teeth and no tongue. The mouth is hissing softly, like all undoer mouths do. It is the endless noise, like radio static, of this world's air and dust as it is sucked past those teeth and into the oblivion inside the undoer, where it is unravelled and annulled.

That is what undoers do. That is what they are. Emissaries of the darkness that hates all life, all pattern. Vessels for havoc.

On the far side of the fire stands Crockett, jabbing his tiny dagger at the undoer with two shaking paws. He is shouting, 'You will go away now, you bad baddie man!' But