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Opening extract from

The Storm Maker

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Prologue

Long ago the sun shone down on an orchard where children were painting. The apple trees swayed languidly in the heat throwing dappled shadows across a dozen easels. Mrs Solana, a woman with pale grey twinkly eyes, walked from canvas to canvas nodding with gentle approval at the crude but happy pictures of sunsets, flowers, giant butterflies. Suddenly she paused at one of the easels.

'This is interesting,' she said. 'Come and look at this, everyone.'

The children gathered around the canvas and gasped with astonishment. The picture seemed so real even though the image was alien to them – a town lying underneath a thick blanket of white.

'Philip Breeze is really using his imagination.' Mrs Solana tilted her head to one side and then the other. 'Tell them what it is, Philip.'

'It's snow. I read about it once,' Philip replied, his gold-flecked eyes bright with interest.

'Yes – snow,' Mrs Solana repeated as though the word held some weight and mystery she could not fathom.

'It's very, very cold apparently,' Philip added.

'So I've heard.' Mrs Solana laughed. 'Your father wouldn't like it much then.' She was about to usher the children back to their seats when Elizabeth, a pretty girl with long red hair, stepped forward, her green eyes glowing.

'It's like something from a dream,' she whispered.

Philip flushed as Elizabeth smiled at him.

A sour-looking boy, Bartholomew Tullock, watched this exchange with narrowed eyes. His clothes were more formal and expensive than the other children's and as he watched he fingered his tight, starched collar with frustration. Then, when Elizabeth's pretty freckled nose was no more than an inch from Philip's canvas, Tullock obviously could bear it no longer. He lunged forward and slammed a fist straight through the picture, then flung it to the ground, panting with rage.

Elizabeth stepped back and the gaze she turned on Bartholomew was icy. For a moment he seemed to falter but then his sullen glower returned.

He leaned over a stunned Philip. 'I will break you, Windy. Hear me?' he sneered. 'You and your family.' Then he took one last look around at his classmates' aghast faces, gave a choked little laugh and ran off.

Chapter One

STRANGE, SHINING THINGS

Showers of golden sparks were reflected in Madeline Breeze's welding visor. Eleven years old and tomboyishly scruffy in her worn dark trousers and brother's too big shirt, she was joyously lost in her work.

Her brother, Rufus Breeze, a couple of years older and a world more tidy in his dress, stepped back from their work bench where he had been drilling holes in a piece of sheet metal and took off a pair of goggles. He straightened his carefully parted light brown hair, adjusted the sun-shaped cufflinks on the sleeves of his cream shirt and tapped his sister lightly on the shoulder.

'Hey, frost-face,' he said. 'Hope you're not making the joints all lumpy. This thing is meant to be delicate.'

Madeline flipped up her visor as she put down her blowtorch and held up the intricate metal framework

she'd been working on. It was beautiful – its lines as true as arrows.

'Does this look "lumpy" to you?' she asked, pushing her strawberry blonde-hair away from her shiny face, leaving an oily smudge on her forehead as she did so. 'But your holes are a little wonky,' she teased. Rufus's face fell. 'I'm joking, Rufus. Your work is always as perfect as snowflakes.'

The children were working in a corner of the living room of the Breeze family house. It was a remarkable dwelling. Decorative wood-panelled walls carved with scenes of hot summer days, picnics and kites, stood in peculiar contrast to the snow falling heavily outside. The glow from the fireplace mingled with the soft light from gas-lamps to illuminate curtains and rugs that although once heavy and opulent, were now threadbare and tatty. And this room, along with all the others, was sparsely furnished – as though selling off items of furniture to raise money for food had become a regular occurence. Worst of all, even the fire's warmth was not strong enough to banish the cold gusts of blizzard that found their way in through every crack around the windows. Rufus and Madeline could not remember a time when it had not been so. Though their parents often told them that once, as the panelled walls suggested, there had been sun in the world, sometimes Rufus and Madeline found it hard to

believe. It seemed to them that it had always snowed in Pinrut.

The most remarkable thing about the Breeze household was, however, none of these details – it was the strange, shining things hiding in the shadows: piled high on shelves, crammed under the stairs and wedged into every nook and cranny. There were hundreds of them, every one different, their sharp edges and curved cogs catching the light all over the room. Even as Madeline and Rufus worked, one of them whirred out from a corner, flitting past Rufus's ear like a large silver moth with coloured glass wings, wafting air in his face as it did so. But Rufus barely noticed for at that moment his mother, Elizabeth Breeze, swished into the room. She shivered as the silvered insect flew on towards her and swatted it out of the way with a grumpy flick of her hand. Her bright green eyes took in the fevered industry of her two children and a frown disrupted her otherwise elegant features. She gave a little heartbroken sigh.

'I thought you were going to have an evening playing like normal children. Anything but more welding and drilling.'

'Father says this is what we Breezes do – what Breezes have been doing for decades,' Madeline reminded her, firing up her blowtorch again. 'Everything else is just frosting.'

'Your father's got a lot to answer for,' Elizabeth said. She glanced at the ornate grandfather clock that sat near the door. 'And where is he? He's been gone hours.'

At that very moment their father, Philip Breeze, was in fact clinging to a cliff face as a raging blizzard howled around him. His face was almost blue with cold but his hazel eyes were still warm with flecks of brilliant gold. His woollen jacket and climbing trousers whipped against his limbs as the high winds buffeted his body.

Philip had been climbing for many hours now and the cold had permeated deep into his skinny frame. But he barely felt it. He had heard about a small deposit of a rare metal in the cliffs to the south west of Pinrut and he was determined to find it. His wool-swathed hands reached up and grabbed the lip of a narrow rock ledge, then he heaved himself over and sat down heavily. The snowstorm was so dense he could see nothing but a churning white mass all around him but he knew the town of Pinrut was out there, far, far below.

Philip tried to remember what it was like to enjoy the warmth of the sun but the cold wind tore his golden memories from him, turning them blue and fragile. He shivered. And to think he had once thought snow was

beautiful! Still, the sun would return soon. It had to. And he had work to do therefore.

He surveyed the rock face behind him and suddenly his heart gave a little leap. A vein of scarlet glistened in the rock above his head. True, he couldn't find his own socks in the morning – but passion and endurance had led him to his prize this time.

With a triumphant grunt, Philip pulled a pick-axe from his leather toolbelt and began hacking at the ore contained in the cliff.

A long, long way east from the busy Breeze family, near the settlement of Pluverton, Sebastian Silver was running for his life through a torrential downpour, with a dog clutched to his chest. From his wide-brimmed hat and butter-coloured cape, to his scarlet waistcoat and breeches, he was sodden. The dog in his arms, a blue-haired terrier of much brain – and less courage – whimpered as what looked like a carving chisel hurtled past them.

'I'm running as fast I can, Mesmer!' Sebastian grunted at him. He looked back over his shoulder and his eyes widened with horror as he took in the fifty angry townsfolk gaining on them. 'People are so touchy around here,'

he added as a large wooden mallet whistled past his ear and he put on another burst of speed.

But eventually even Sebastian had to admit that his boots were filling with cold water and the bog beneath him was getting boggier.

'Ah, fickle fortune! I can't outrun them. I shall have to out-talk them,' he muttered at last and he turned to face the fearsome hoard.

The villagers' faces were flushed with anger. Sebastian hugged Mesmer closer as the rain continued to lash at them viciously. 'Is that your heart beating alarmingly fast?' he hissed in the dog's ear.

Mesmer gave a low, disdainful snuffle.

'Oh, it's mine, is it? Excellent.'

The crowd sploshed towards them menacingly. Mesmer bared his teeth.

'Do I take it there is some dissatisfaction with the tools I sold you?' Sebastian began. 'It's just I'm not an expert, but hurling them at someone's head is probably not the best way to actually make anything.'

Sebastian recognized the village leader as he waded to the fore.

'You can stop with all that highfalutin wit and stuff,' grunted Elder Sourflood, before splashing closer so that he loomed threateningly over Sebastian. He was enormous and hairy and wearing a large tin bucket on his

head. Rainwater cascaded off it like a waterfall and would have fallen clear of his wet woollen clothing altogether had he not had the most gigantic barrel of a chest. 'These tools are shoddy and about as much use to us as a paper umbrella!'

Sourflood held up a handsaw even as the blade fell out of it and plopped into the water around his ankles.

'I didn't make them,' Sebastian said.

'Yeah, well you dripping well sold them to us!' exclaimed another member of the crowd who had a clockwork device strapped to his face with an arm that flicked back and forth batting water droplets from the end of his nose. 'And you knew how useless they were – no wonder we caught you trying to sneak out of town at the break of dawn . . .'

Sebastian rolled his eyes. 'I suppose you want your money back.'

'No, we want some good, decent tools,' Elder Sourflood said. 'The rains here been lashing down for the past fifteen years and we need to keep our town up on stilts and the rooves watertight otherwise we'll all have the rotten-foot.'

'How about I go away, find some improved tools and then come back?' Sebastian offered.

'All right, go fetch us new tools, but you *better* come back,' another muscle-bound crowd member agreed. His

particularly bushy eyebrows appeared to have been knitted together loosely to form a mesh above his eyes, keeping the water out.

'Of course I'll return. Don't you trust me?' Sebastian boomed at him indignantly.

'It's just you better be quick about it. You're our only hope this late in the day,' Sourflood said. 'The heavy rains start soon and we need to get repairing. We're sunk otherwise.'

Sebastian looked up at the torrential deluge of water that was falling out of the sky. *Heavy* rains he thought to himself. What would *that* be like?

'I bid you farewell then and shall return forthwith,' Sebastian said. He turned away quickly to hide his gleeful grin. Now if he could just get away at speed before they—

'Not so fast,' Sourflood growled. 'Do we look stupid?'

Sebastian turned back. He surveyed the population of Pluverton – with their knitted eyebrows, clockwork nose-drip flickers and the buckets on their heads – and decided it was best not to answer that question.

'Give us our sodden money back.' Sourflood held out a large, meaty hand.

Grinding his teeth, Sebastian slapped the bag of coins into the Elder's moist palm. Mesmer gave a sad whine.

'Till again we meet,' Sebastian intoned over his shoulder as he walked away.

'Soon!' Sourflood boomed after him.

'Or not,' Sebastian whispered to Mesmer without a backward look.

Chapter Two

THEIR FATHER'S OBSESSION

Philip Breeze finally threw the front door open a few hours later and staggered into the room, grinning from ear to ear. A flurry of snow billowed in with him.

'Hey, I've got it! I've got the vendilium metal!' he cried, holding the canvas bag aloft with triumph and kicking the door shut behind him.

Madeline ran to her father and hugged him.

'You can use it to make the best one ever!' she exclaimed.

'You know, Sunshine, I think I just might,' Philip said as he handed the metal deposits to an eager Rufus to examine.

'And remember, the things we make – it's not enough that they work. We must also make them special. Breathe