

THE SHIVERED SKY



MATT DINNIMAN

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SILVER LAKE
PUBLISHING

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Published by Silver Lake Publishing
<http://www.silverlakepublishing.com>

SLP Electronic edition / June 2003
SLP Trade Paperback edition / June 2003

ISBN: 1-931095-50-7 (Electronic edition)
ISBN: 1-931095-51-5 (Trade Paperback edition)

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For my father.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Wow. My first book. As I sat down at my computer today I stared for a moment at my desktop wallpaper. It's of Socar Myles' beautiful rendering of the cover for this book. I put that picture on my computer not only because it's really cool, but because it reminds me of all the people who've helped me get to this point. My first book. Amazing.

First and foremost, I must offer thanks to Meredyth. You are my muse. To the Punk and the Princess for teaching me how to survive on three hours of sleep. To my parents and brothers for not judging me too harshly. (Hey, every family's got to have an artist!) To Drew for not yet putting out a hit on me. To Robert R. McCammon for making me want to write; to Guy Gavriel Kay for making me want to strive to write well. To Meg Files for teaching me how to do it to the best of my abilities. To every person I've ever attended a writing workshop with—in person or over the phone or on the internet—with a very special thanks going to Michael Stone, Tammi Hyde, Pam Davis, and Dr. Andrew Burt. To Sherri Szeman for being one of the first to make me feel like a real writer. To Socar Myles for the awesome cover. To Stephanie Weidner for the chance. To the only companions I had during the many, many dark nights, especially Dream Theater, Fates Warning, Pain of Salvation, Bruce Dickinson, and for that final stretch, Green Carnation. To my playthings over at the IM and BD BB, especially those who offered specific help, namely Marko "ManOwarrior" Elijaš, Kingravi, Starlight, Lamia, and Dreamwatch. Oh, and to James J. Kruse, Ph.D., a complete stranger who happily answered a very bizarre question about praying mantises. I'm sure I've forgotten many. I'll mention you guys next time.

PART 1

THE BEACH

With death came life.

The young woman opened her eyes, blinking in the strange light. She sat up slowly, stretching her arms. For an instant, it was peaceful. A cool breeze gently caressed her back and shoulders, and every muscle was relaxed.

But then, gradually, the serenity of the moment began to fade as she realized she was completely naked. And she had no idea where she was.

Calm down. Take a deep breath, look around.

All around her stretched an infinite beach of white sand, flanked by a never-ending azure ocean so absolutely still, her chest pulled with fear at the sight of it. But most disturbing was the sky. It was dark crimson, like blood spilled across clear glass. There was no sun, yet there was light. The beach stretched far behind her, sloping up until it disappeared into a dark, foreboding haze. The only sound was her quick, frantic breathing, and it was unnatural and loud in the complete silence.

How did she get here? She searched her recent memory, and with a terrible, almost choking horror she realized she didn't have any memory at all. She jumped to her feet then, frantically looking around.

She took a step and realized she was standing upon something solid. Beneath her bare feet, covered with a light dusting of sand, was a small platform of beige marble tiles. About the size of a kick-boxing ring. At each corner was a broken, jagged stump. She stepped forward and ran her hand across one. A quick jolt of electricity shocked her. She jerked back with a yelp.

"Hello?" she called. The words sounded odd, tinny. "Hello?"

She wrapped her dark arms around her chest. Her hands shook. She desperately tried to remember something, *anything*. *I can't just stand here like an idiot. I have to do something.*

She moved to the edge and stepped off, sinking to her ankles in the sand. The fine grains were silken, almost a liquid, unnaturally warm. She sensed the ground wasn't solid, like the sand was actually much deeper. She stepped again. She was swallowed another inch. She waded about twenty feet out, but she became hopelessly bogged down, the sand sucking at her legs, trying to draw her in. *I can't even get away. Is this some sort of prison?* Defeated, she turned

back to the platform.

Two people now sat there, their sudden appearance so utterly surprising, she took a step back into the unforgiving sand. Boys. One was about sixteen years old with scraggly blonde hair. He jumped to his feet, looking around like a cornered animal. The other was only slightly older with shoulder-length brown hair, and his naked body was rail thin, his rib bones almost pushing through his chest. He stood slowly, a grin on his face. He was tall, towering over the other boy.

Both of the boys turned to see each other and, realizing that they were naked, quickly crossed their legs and covered themselves with their hands. They hadn't noticed her yet, but she panicked, pulling her arm over her chest. She had the urge to allow the sand to swallow her.

But her fear quickly turned to relief. *They're people like me. They just had the same thing happen to them.* Still keeping her hand over her chest, she trudged toward them. She called out, and both turned and watched. She didn't like their eyes on her naked body. The tall one with the long hair held out his hand for her as she returned to the marble. She awkwardly grasped his hand, trying to cover her chest and cross her legs as much as she could. His grip was strong. He smiled, showing a row of straight, white teeth.

"Gramm," he said. It took her a second to realize he was introducing himself.

"Hi." She kept her eyes averted, and thankfully he was doing the same. "Do you... Do you know what's going on?"

"Of course," he said.

The other boy put his hands to his head. "This isn't fucking happening."

She looked back and forth between the two. "What? I don't remember anything. Do I know you people?"

The blonde-haired boy's eyes were wild with fear. He stopped covering himself and waved his arms. "I am not here. I can't be. There was a man. He saw me. He was going for help."

Gramm put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "You *are* here. Whatever happened to you, it's over now." His accent was much different than hers. Australian.

Gramm smiled sadly. "I knew I was dying. I think that's why it's easier for me."

The blonde boy sat, tucking his head into his knees. He rocked back and forth, crying. “Why?” he whispered. “I can’t believe it. Holy fuck. Mom’s gonna freak out.”

“What’s your name?” Gramm asked the boy.

“David,” he whispered, still crying. “My friends... called me Dave.”

She took a step back. Her mouth was dry, a desert, and her words wavered with fear. “What are you talking about? Where are we?”

The boy named Dave looked piercingly at her. “Don’t you get it? *We are dead.*”

They stared at each other. Her own nakedness was momentarily forgotten. She allowed it to sink in. She felt as if a giant rock had been dropped right onto her chest. “Do I look dead to you?”

Dave pointed up to the red, sunless sky. “Does that look like Earth to you?”

“No. That’s impossible.” Everything spun. Suddenly she was on her knees, and her heart which had been thrashing about so quickly and irregularly was trying to now escape out of her chest and up her throat. *Dead?* Her fingertips tingled.

“Well,” Gramm said, sitting next to her. “I know two things. One, I’m dead. And two, I am here.” He put his hand on her knee, and it was reassuring despite their nakedness. He had a strong smell to him, like freshly cut grass.

Her limbs were numb. “I don’t remember anything, but you do. Why?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Dave stood, flexing his arm. Tears still streamed down his face, and he was shaking, too. “My arms have gotten so big.” She stared at his crotch. She couldn’t help it. He noticed and quickly covered it with his hand, his cheeks burning red like the sky.

“I think this part got smaller,” he said sheepishly.

To her surprise, she laughed. Loudly. *It’s not even that funny.* She pictured an older black woman nodding approvingly. “*Laugh anyway,*” the woman said. “*Always laugh when you can, Indy.*” Her heart leapt, something to grasp onto.

“Indigo,” she said suddenly. “That’s my name. Indigo.”

Dave rubbed his nose. “Are you sure? That’s a weird name.”

“I’m sure,” she whispered. All she had was her name.

“Well that proves it,” Gramm said. “Your memory is coming back.” The

thin Australian was so confident while she and Dave were absolute wrecks. He wasn't afraid at all. The boy had a charisma about him that was alluring, and it made her trust him.

"Please, what is this place?" she asked him.

A penetrating light burst on the center of the platform, like a camera's flash, causing them all to jump. Indigo let out a cry. A burning... *something* appeared. She gasped. A skeleton. A burning skeleton, prostrate on the tiles. Indigo skittered back, her stomach tightening.

Dear god, what now? The burning form started to move. First it was slow and erratic, like it was controlled by a drunken puppeteer. Then the movements became quicker, jerky and wild. Its mouth opened, as if to scream. But the only sound was the click-clicking of the bones scraping together, the sound of drumsticks hitting each other in a frenzied dissonance.

The flames whiffed out in a sudden puff of smoke. An acrid smell rose, like burned sausage. Organs took form within the rib cage, growing. A slight scream emanated from the open jaw, and the blood-curdling cry grew until it filled the silence like a choking fog. Flesh spread across the body, and hair sprouted from the head.

A girl. Young and Asian, about sixteen, petite with tiny road bumps for breasts. Her hair grew to be long and straight. Finally she stopped her wail. She looked at the three of them, eyes wide. She rolled over and curled into a fetal position, weeping.

"*Shit,*" confident Gramm whispered, his voice cracking.

Swallowing her fear, Indigo moved to the girl and tentatively touched her shoulder. What just happened? The skin felt like ice. "Are you all right?"

The girl didn't stop crying. Indigo looked back at Gramm and Dave for help.

"What's that smell?" a new voice asked, a thick Spanish accent. "Hey! Where're my clothes!"

A Hispanic boy sat to her right, wide eyes staring directly at her chest. He just appeared out of nowhere, like the others had. He had short, curly hair and was a little pudgy. Easily the youngest so far, about fourteen. Indigo squeezed her arms tightly around her chest again.

"Where am I?" the new boy said looking around wildly. "Where's my chair?"

As Gramm and Dave began to quietly speak to the boy, Indigo turned back to the girl. Her eyes were clenched shut, but the tears still wet her face. “Are you okay?”

The girl slowly opened her almond-shaped eyes. “It was horrible,” she whispered.

Indigo moved the hair from girl’s face and placed it behind her ear. She was very pretty. “It’s all over now,” Indigo said. But it wasn’t over, was it? They were trapped here. Any more people and this platform would soon be too crowded.

“It took longer than I thought. I would have done it different if I knew it was going to hurt so much.”

The words were like frost. “Don’t worry about that anymore. You’re here now.”

“Where?” the girl asked, her voice trembling, looking around. She seemed to suddenly realize that she, too, was naked and pulled her own arms around herself, unsuccessfully trying to cover her chest, crotch, and behind all at once.

“I don’t know. We’re on a beach.”

“I ain’t standing up,” the Hispanic boy was saying, his agitated voice rising.

“Just try it, Rico,” Gramm said.

“You all speak Japanese,” the girl said, suddenly surprised. “But you’re black.”

“I’m not. I’m...” But as she spoke the words, she felt them rearrange as they came out of her mouth. It wasn’t English either. It was a different, silvery language. Light and musical. That’s why her voice sounded different. *So strange.*

“Do you remember your name?” Indigo asked.

She softly sighed, a lot of sadness in her voice, a deep well of hurt. “Hitomi.”

“Holy crap!” the new boy exclaimed loudly. He was now standing, unashamed. Despite his husky build, his arms seemed extremely strong. Bigger even than Dave’s.

As Indigo tried desperately to find another strand of memory to grasp onto, she watched the others begin to deal with their own deaths. The blonde

Dave looked trampled upon, completely defeated, and Gramm just continued to smile.

The young Rico walked around in circles, his hands trembling, talking to himself. With nothing but the strange, unmoving ocean and the blood red sky behind him, the boy looked out of place. He cast an occasional, sidelong glance at Hitomi, but he looked away when he noticed Indigo watching him. Hitomi had stopped crying, but now she just stared at the haze, her eyes bottomless pits of pain.

Rico moved to the edge of the platform to touch one of the four jagged stumps.

“Don’t,” Indigo said. “It’ll shock you.”

He reached forward to touch it anyway. Nothing happened. “No it won’t,” he said.

Indigo sighed softly. How do you deal with something like this? She wasn’t sure how she was supposed to be acting. She was dead. It seemed to be the only explanation, and the others all accepted it. The fear was still a living thing in her chest and stomach, but a terrible curiosity grew as well. How did it happen?

Hitomi suddenly sat up, her hand searching around her neck, as if looking for a necklace that wasn’t there. “We’re in hell,” she said.

“No,” Gramm said forcefully, immediately, as if he had been expecting someone to say it. “Past this beach is a forest, and a path. It leads to the great city.”

Everyone stopped at that. “What? Have you been here before?” Indigo asked.

He was quiet for a moment. “The last few years I’ve been having dreams. There’s a forest. Beyond that a city. The buildings are huge. It’s the city of Heaven.”

Rico’s eyes moved from Hitomi’s breasts to Gramm. “Just one city?”

“That’s all I’ve seen,” Gramm said. “But it’s a city larger than all of Australia. And it’s filled with angels with great wings. There are floating gardens hundreds of kilometers long. There are zoos, theaters, a silver train that’s faster than an airplane. And in the middle is a tower that reaches far into the sky.”

His words filled her with hope, an extinguisher on the fear, but she was

still skeptical, afraid to believe. “You’re not making this up?”

He smiled. “It’s why I’m not freaking out. There was something else, too. There was always a voice in my dreams. It said the same thing every time. ‘You are the Navigator. Lead them here.’”

“Lead us where?” Dave asked.

“I guess I have to help everyone get to the city. It’s pretty far away.”

“Why don’t they send an angel or something?” Dave asked. His tears had stopped, but his words still trembled. “We’re never going to get out of here.” He motioned to Indigo. “We can’t cross the sand. She already tried.”

Indigo nodded. She didn’t want to go out there again.

“Wait a second,” Dave said. “Aren’t *we* angels now? Are we going to grow wings?”

“No,” Gramm said. “Angels are different.”

Dave pointed at Indigo’s shoulder. “It looks like she is.”

She reached back, and sure enough a round, two-inch scar blazed on the back of both of her shoulder blades. Did she have them before? What did it mean? None of the others had it. *So strange.*

“Hey guys,” Rico said loudly. “Check this out.”

He pulled at one of the marble tiles, the one right in the center. Dave quickly moved to help. They both grunted as the thick rock yawned upward. Finally it moved over with a loud *clunk*.

“Look, there’s a stairway,” Rico said excitedly.

Hitomi moved to the stairs, peering into the darkness. “Do you think there’ll be clothes?”

“I don’t know if that’s where we’re supposed to go,” Gramm said. “I never saw anything like this in my dreams.”

Hitomi had already disappeared down the stairs. Dave and Rico followed.

“It smells like socks in here,” Rico said from inside. His voice echoed.

“Come on,” Indigo said. “Let’s go.”

“Maybe I should wait out here,” Gramm said, reluctant.

“You’re sure of where we are, right?”

He nodded, but his eyes were afraid.

No, don’t be afraid, she wanted to cry out. You’re the confident one. You’re the reason I’m not in hysterics right now. She forced herself to smile.

“Come on. We’ll stay close.”

THE BEACON

Rico was scared. Damn scared. But he didn't want to show it, and the fact that he could now walk after so many years helped him hide the fear. *Don't be a pussy. If this Gramm guy is right you've made it to the good place.* The words of the Chinese chick still gave him the creeps. But if this was hell, why would they give him back his legs?

As a little kid he would sometimes sleep on the roof of his house, pulling himself up there only by the power of his arms. The nights were always hot and sticky, the bugs attacking him relentlessly. He'd stare at the dark sky and wonder about death. He thought of clouds and angels with harps and of a place where you were never hungry or scared all the time. He never imagined anything like this, and he did not like being in situations where he didn't know what was going to happen. He didn't like feeling out of control, in a place where he could mess something up and people would laugh at him. He was terrified of what was to come. Already he knew this was no heaven like *Padre Montamos* said.

He still couldn't remember everything that had happened. All he could see was the front wheel of his racing chair spinning. The sound of laughter echoing into the night.

They came to a cavernous room at the foot of the stairs. Hitomi explored down a single dark hallway followed by the buff white guy named Dave. A minute later, the tall black girl and the even taller Gramm came down.

What was her name? Indigo. There was something spooky about her. She didn't talk like no black girl he had ever met. She was smart, that's for sure. Rico could see it in her eyes. But she talked like an Anglo—even though they were all speaking some weird-ass language now. Her accent was white American and was unnatural on her. She walked like a white person, too.

Dave reappeared, grinning for the first time. He held a pile of clothes. Rico's enthusiasm died a bit when he saw what the clothes were. He had expected some Jedi-knight robes or something. This was like black body spandex. He picked up a pair, examining then sliding them on. It was better than being naked, but now he felt like a fairy. There were cuts at the back in the shoulders. And they had feet like kiddy pajamas, but they felt solid, form-

ing over his toes like steel boots. He kicked at the stone wall, and he didn't feel a thing.

"Hell yeah," he said. "High tech."

"There's a small room just down the hall. It's filled with these. There's some other stuff in there we should check out," Dave said.

"Do you think we should be just taking these?" Gramm asked. But he put his suit on just as quickly as the others. He worried over everything like an old lady.

The chamber suddenly filled with a brilliant yellow light. The shadows fled like cockroaches. Rico jumped, then tripped over his own feet. His suit shielded the pain of the fall, but it did nothing to cushion his ego. Dave laughed, twisting the knife some more. He stood and brushed himself off, glaring.

Hitomi emerged from the hallway. She wore a suit and held a metal briefcase. She wasn't smiling. She didn't look like someone who *could* smile. Like an emotionless robot. "I found the light switch."

"No shit," Rico muttered, embarrassed. Gramm shot him an angry scowl. He almost said something back at him, but then he noticed the walls. They were covered with pictures. Like the stuff you'd see in history books. Cave-man drawings.

Rico walked up to one of the images. They were out of place here. He traced his fingers along the etchings, trying to figure out what the picture was.

Indigo stood beside him. She smelled kind of like flowers. It was nice. After a minute she said, "It's an angel."

He took a step back, reveling in the simple motion. "I don't see it."

"It's on fire."

"Whoa." She was right. It all came into focus. It was a crude drawing of a winged man holding a big-ass sword. He was consumed in flames, and the grimace on his face was agonizing. He could feel it. The wings were pretty bizarre looking, made of smoke.

Gramm, Hitomi, and Dave tried to open the suitcase thing Hitomi had found. There was a handle on it, but no latch.

"Maybe it's not meant to be opened," Gramm said.

But Dave wouldn't give up. "Well it's not just a metal box. They wouldn't put a handle on it if it didn't do anything."