



"Seeker takes the best of Anne Rice and Stephen Donaldson and combines it into a slow-burn, deep and surprisingly rich novel."
- Anne Brooke, Vulpes Libris

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*'A man can surely do what he wills to do,
But cannot determine what he wills.'*

Arthur Schopenhauer

2021: The As Yet To Be

SAM LOOKED up as the head rolled along the floor.

‘We really must get better guards,’ he said with a sigh.

‘Trust me, they won’t help.’

Sam smiled at the man who walked into the inner sanctum. To Sam’s left was a window, looking out across the ruined city that had been, in another life, his home. And at the heart of the city, the Pyramid of Light. It had been made for his wife, who was, even now, out there bringing forth their children. The Pyramid had been built to be the most well-protected place in the domain, but if anybody was going to breach its defences, it was fitting that it be the man before him.

It had been a while since they had laid eyes on each other, at least five years, and time had not been good on his old friend. He looked old and worn, his shoulder length ginger-brown hair now greying, his beard full. But there was a radiance about him that was new.

Sam suspected he knew why.

‘Must we do this now?’ he asked.

The man brandished his sword. ‘It is time.’

Sam stood up and approached the man, his eyes narrowing. It was as he suspected. ‘I know this sword. How did you come by it?’

‘How do you think?’

The hilt of the sword was fashioned in pure gold, while the silver blade shone like the sun, the inscription on it plain. Sam’s eyes widened in wonder. ‘Then it truly is time, Hêlêl.’

‘Still you call me that...’ Hêlêl almost smiled.

‘It’s the name I always preferred.’ Sam sighed as he stepped back, still tired from his recent transformation. ‘You could have said no.’

‘Like you did? I didn’t have the choice.’

At this Sam smiled. ‘Really? Let me tell you something about choice...’

Ten Years Earlier:

PART ONE

WILLEM TOWNSEND tugged his jacket about him, wondering just what has possessed him to go to the park in such a cold weather. Not one of his best ideas. Curtis, his two-and-a-half-year-old nephew, didn't seem to mind. Despite the circumstances, he always enjoyed spending time with his nephew, and was happy for any opportunity given him, even if it was a result of another of his sister's 'crises'.

He didn't know the specifics, and at that moment he didn't much care; he could probably guess them, and he'd be right. James 'Jimmy' Aspinall, his sister's boyfriend and, consequently, Curtis' dad.

Willem shook his head and brushed the thoughts aside; when Ren finally turned up for her son he'd no doubt hear all the usual excuses and be impressed by none of them. Right now, all he cared was that Curtis was safely away from the latest crisis and the shit no doubt surrounding it. Even if that meant visiting Ravenscourt Park in the cold, Willem was happy to indulge Curtis.

It was one of those odd March days where, although the sun had clearly put its hat on, the wind had decided to come out and play too. It wasn't anything close to a gale force, merely a light breeze, but it was biting cold which left people like Willem in the odd position of having a thick jacket on while at the same time wearing sunglasses to protect his sensitive eyes from the painful light.

He had spent much time in Ravenscourt Park back when he was a kid, having been brought up in nearby Chiswick. Plenty of memories; welly throwing competitions, inflatables, summer fairs. All good times.

As Curtis climbed the steps of the slide once more, Willem looked around the play area they were in and felt a wave of sadness. It had changed so much since he was a child; gone were the small paddling pool and sandpit, replaced by more vandalised swings and even more dead space. There was so little for the kids to actually do in the play area. The swings were mostly bugged, the slide had more grip than his shoes, and the roundabout was a source of more sweat than actual fun. To get even the slightest bit of speed required the kind of strength that Geoff Capes would have been proud to possess.

Geoff Capes!

Willem really was feeling his age. It was this place; he hadn't visited Ravenscourt Park in years, and the nostalgia was intoxicating.

The rumble of the train passing by on its way to Stamford Brook dragged his attention to the arches behind the play area. It was funny how times changed the way you associated things; back when he used to frequent Ravenscourt Park they were just further play areas with see-saws and the like. Now though, as he stood there, he couldn't help but envisage Ricky and Phil working on cars, despite the fact that Ravenscourt Park was nowhere near Walford.

Willem shook his head and looked back over the play area. It was empty except for him and Curtis, but nonetheless he saw children and parents everywhere. Ghosts of times long gone. Laughing and joking, the swings looking brand new as dads pushed their kids, the older brothers gently spinning the younger siblings on the roundabout. It was 1981, the year of mothers dressed in the mass-marketed Azzedine Alaia knock-offs, and children with tight shorts and bright dresses. The boys were running around the park playing at being Indiana Jones, while most of the girls were combing the manes of Applejack or whatever *My Little Pony* they were lucky enough to own. Willem at five was less interested in Indiana Jones than he was in the other craze that was then sweeping across the UK, in the shape of the Rubik's Cube.

He could see himself sitting there, on the edge of the paddling pool, his feet dipping in, showing his skill with the cube to the kid who was destined to become his life-long best friend, Jacob Caulfield – Jake.

Willem smiled at the memory. It was one of the best times he could recall from his childhood; for all the wrong reasons. Most people tended to recall a time of closeness with their families, where they felt safe in the presence of their parents, but not Willem. It was the best time because Jake had only been living next door for two weeks and, although he could never have expressed it at the time, Willem knew he'd found the one true friend that would always be there.

They were at the park with Jake's mother, who the five-year-old Willem found endlessly fascinating. It wasn't her amazing beauty, but rather her accent. She was American! It seemed an odd thing to be fascinated by, looking back in an age where the internet had made the world so small, but back in the early '80s having an American family living next door was akin to living next to Buckingham Palace. Americans were only really seen at the cinema and on TV. Having a family who sounded like Buck Rodgers and Wilma Deering on the same street was the most exciting thing young Willem could have imagined. It didn't take Willem long to make friends with Jake, especially seeing as Jake ended up in the same class

at school. Barely two weeks on and Willem was out at the park with his new American friend, the two of them were inseparable.

Willem sighed. He knew exactly why he'd come to Ravenscourt Park now. Things with Charlie were heating up, and now they were verging on actual relationship material. It was a new thing for Willem; never had he felt this way about someone. Well, not *strictly* true...

The enormity of what was coming was not lost on Willem, and so when Curtis had been dumped on him, he had unconsciously chosen to take his nephew to the place he'd been happiest as a kid, when things were equally as new but in a different way.

He was brought out of his thoughts by a clunk behind him, and an eek of pain from Curtis. He looked over. The boy had bumped his head trying to walk under the slide.

Curtis looked up at his uncle, his face scrunched up. 'Bumped my two-head,' he cried.

Will smiled at that, remembering what Jolene had told him about when Curtis had met Tim, her four-year-old nephew. They were talking about Tim's forehead, which had acquired a nice bruise, when Curtis pointed at his own and told them that he had a two-head. It took the adults a moment to realise why Curtis had said that.

Seemed Curtis would forever have a two-head, at least until he was three. Will smiled. How long could he keep that joke going?

Kneeling down, so he was closer to Curtis' level, Willem asked in a firm voice, 'Why are you crying?'

Through sniffs Curtis replied, 'For no reason.'

Well, Willem couldn't argue with that, but it wasn't the reason for which he'd been searching. 'If for no reason, why you crying?'

'Because it's naughty,' Curtis tried again, his two-and-a-half-year-old mind coming up with another of the responses he'd been taught.

Willem laughed. 'No, it's not naughty this time. You're just being silly. You don't need to cry just because you bumped your two-head. Do you understand?'

Curtis sniffed, his bottom lip trembling. 'Yes.'

'Good,' Willem said, knowing full well that Curtis didn't quite get it yet, and took a tissue out of his pocket. 'Now let's wipe those tears away before they become

stuck to your face. You don't want that, do you?' he asked, his tone now light and playful.

'No,' Curtis replied, the sniffing dissipating. 'I look silly then.'

'Of course you would. Come here; give your uncle a skwudge!' Tears wiped away, Curtis embraced Willem and for a moment the two remained like that, the unconditional love of his nephew warming Willem's heart.

A slight vibration in his pocket and the unmistakable emotive vocals of Adam Levine alerted Willem to an incoming message, and he immediately released Curtis. 'Go on, play,' he said, as he retrieved his phone from his jacket. He flipped it open and read the message from Charlie, but beyond the phone the blurred Curtis remained where he was, looking up at his uncle. Willem sighed and returned his focus to Curtis. 'Shall we get you some chocolate?'

'A trick?'

Willem smiled, and took Curtis' little hand in his. 'Yes, we'll get you a Twix. Come on.' Together they left the play area, Curtis smiling at the thought of the upcoming 'trick'.

Willem didn't notice, his attention was on the text message. He smiled broadly, feeling the familiar samba within, and quickened his pace.

He should have realised that getting home quickly would be a virtual impossibility, but he had been so caught up in the anticipation of his forthcoming chat with Charlie that he'd totally forgotten it was almost midday on a Saturday, and more importantly that big home matches were being played that day at both Fulham and Chelsea.

By the time he'd got through the traffic, Curtis was fast asleep in the booster seat, after nattering away to himself during the slow journey from Ravenscourt to Fulham Palace Road. The length of the rest of the ride home was clearly too long for the boy to keep his mind active, and sleep had soon won over the previously interesting stream of people they passed. Willem didn't want to wake the kid, but, alas, Curtis was one of those light sleepers, and as soon as Willem unbuckled the straps, Curtis began to stir.

Acting quickly, he scooped Curtis up and held him so that Curtis could rest his head on Willem's shoulder. With the addition of a few soothing sounds Curtis was soon back to sleep, and Willem rushed inside his house as quickly as he could, careful to keep Curtis' face out of direct contact with the oncoming cold breeze.

His house was a pretty typical affair from the outside; one of the many converted Victorian houses situated on Barclay Road, just off Fulham Broadway, but the ramshackle look of the outside belied the luxury within. It was left to appear a little rundown externally on purpose by Willem; a safeguard against potential burglars. Despite its rise to prominence due to the recent development of Chelsea football club and the Broadway shopping centre, this area of Fulham was still quite known for its high rate of crime, and burglary played a not-so small part in that. Willem, thanks to his coffee shop business which, with three shops now, was turning into a profitable small chain, was living quite comfortably, but he didn't wish it to become public knowledge and so he allowed his house to appear dishevelled. Burglars generally chose places they knew they'd make a quick profit off, and to their mind Willem's house was just another old Victorian home settled by some old codger who barely had enough money to maintain it.

Within the walls though, it was another story. The entire interior, from lounge to bathroom, had an air of homeliness to it. Framed arty pictures decked the walls of the hallway and the lounge, going all the way up the two flights of stairs and along both landings. Once the front door was closed behind him, Willem dumped Curtis' little rucksack on the carpeted floor and kicked off his shoes, before jogging up the first flight of stairs to the spare room.

Certain that Curtis wouldn't stir for a while, Willem left the door open a crack and bounded downstairs, into the lounge where his laptop was still sitting on the glass coffee table before the Como sofa. He opened the laptop only to discover that the battery was dead, and only then recalled he hadn't bothered removing the charger from the laptop backpack when he'd returned home the previous night. He scouted around the room for the backpack. The lounge was, being the centre of his social interaction when at home, done out with luxury and relaxation in mind. The three-seater Como sat opposite the old Victorian fireplace, which still used real wood to warm the lounge, and was complemented by a Como chair which sat adjacent to the fireplace before which stood a footstool done out in the same Como style. Many a cold night was spent by Willem lounging in the chair with his feet resting on the stool, the burning logs warming his feet. By the bay window was the latest in home cinema software sitting on top of a stylish metal frame, the bottom shelf of which housed a DVD recorder, a Wii and an Xbox 360 Kinect.

The backpack was nowhere in the lounge that he could see, but as his eyes scanned the room one last time before giving up, he spotted the charger lead sitting

on the bottom shelf on his Conran Balance shelving unit. He grabbed the lead and plugged it into the wall and then the back of the laptop.

While the laptop powered up, Willem headed into the kitchen to prepare himself a mug of coffee, smiling to himself. Not many got to see his scar, but once the laptop was ready to go it was Skype time, and he was almost certain Charlie would be seeing the scar today.

Before even putting the kettle on he released the lock off the back door, and opened the top window above the sink. It was a thing with him; he didn't like the back door being locked while he was home and awake as he hated not having fresh air running through the house. Of course, the concept of 'fresh' air was a bit of an oxymoron in London, but better to have external air running throughout the house than the stale air that circulated in a closed environment. The plants played their part in oxygenating the house, but there was no harm in offering a little help.

The kettle now on the boil, Willem checked in the lounge to see how the laptop was doing. It was all ready to go, he simply had to await the connection of the net. He opened Skype in preparation, just as he heard the back door open.

He let out a groan of disappointment, hardly able to believe his luck. The one time he didn't want his sister to come back early...

'Hazelnut Macchiato for me,' said a male voice, which still, after all these years, contained a trace of an American accent.

Willem smiled ruefully. Getting rid of his sister would have been difficult enough, but getting rid of Jake while Amy was at work...? In what he would have called a mini-strop had Curtis done it, Willem slammed the laptop shut.

'Mate, kettle's boiled.' There was the scrape of a stool being pulled across the lino and Willem knew that Jake was plonking himself by the back door so that his smoke wouldn't waft into the house.

Willem grumbled silently to himself and pulled out his phone. 'Get making it, then,' he called out to the kitchen, satisfied by the loud sigh he received in response. He could just see Jake stubbing the cigarette on the wall in the back yard before returning to the kitchen.

'Some host you are.'

Willem smiled, despite himself, and began texting Charlie. On the way out to the kitchen he bumped into Jake, who was coming to have a nose.

'Shit, guy,' Jake said, rubbing his shoulder, 'you should watch where you're going.'

Willem looked incredulously at his best mate. Like he could hurt that brick-house of a body. It was his own fault, though, since he'd been so intent on quickly stashing his phone away that he'd got it stuck on a piece of thread in his pocket. 'Shut up, you girl. Coffee done?'

Jake eyed Willem in mock pain. 'I thought I'd go for a latte today, actually. Coffee is so last year.'

'Whatever. Shift your ass.'

Jake turned and headed back into the kitchen. 'Commencing the shifting of the ass,' he said, mincing his way ahead. Willem couldn't help but laugh; no one could do camp as well as Jake and it was always guaranteed to get a laugh out of him.

Finally, the phone found its way into his pocket snugly, and the good humour dripped coldly away. A few days ago he wouldn't have cared for shit if Jake had known about Charlie, but now he was relieved that his mate hadn't queried the whole delay with the phone. He wasn't quite sure why that was, and he was still frowning over it when he entered the kitchen.

Jake was sitting on the stool by the open door, puffing away at a freshly lit fag, his coffee cup sitting on the breakfast bar behind him. Willem's own mug was still sitting next to the kettle, the open milk bottle beside it.

'You could have put the milk away, fella. Wouldn't have hurt you.'

Jake flicked some ash into the back yard and glanced over at the milk. 'I could, true, but then you'd be left with black coffee.'

'Lazy sod,' Willem said, spying his milk-less coffee. 'And you couldn't have put it in mine because why?'

Jake shrugged. 'Don't remember signing up as your slave.'

Willem narrowed his eyes. 'Right, whatever,' he said, sharper than he meant to. Not wishing to pursue it anymore, he poured his own milk, then returned the bottle back to the fridge. He picked up his mug and took a deep sip, enjoying the heat as it surged down his throat. The caffeine hit his taste buds, and he immediately felt better.

'Want to talk about it?'

Willem closed his eyes, and slowly turned to Jake. 'Usual shit,' he said, knowing full well what Jake would infer from that.

'What's that prick done now?' Jake asked, all humour gone.

Jimmy wasn't Jake's favourite person. In fact, Willem considered, he couldn't imagine Jimmy being anybody's favourite person. Willem always got a kick out of the way Jake's whole demeanour changed whenever Jimmy's name was mentioned. Although Jake didn't work out, he was naturally a big man, much like his dad had been, and working on a construction site helped to maintain the muscles better than any gym would have done, and whenever Jimmy was mentioned it was as if some automatic signal was sent to Jake's cardio system and the muscles immediately tensed. The new shaved head was a bit of a departure from his usual look (he'd had it shaved for Amy, his girlfriend of two months), and only helped to complete an ensemble of threat and danger.

'Same old, up to his eyeballs in shit. Ren has dumped Curtis on me.'

Jake looked around. 'Where is the champ?'

'Napping. I tell you, man, this ain't gonna end well.'

'That's a sure thing,' Jake said, his voice little more than a rumble now. 'You honestly need to let me take the fucker out.'

Someone needed to give Jimmy a good slap, but Willem suspected it would take a lot more than that to sort that man out. He'd been nothing but trouble for Ren.

'Something tells me Amy wouldn't approve of that.'

Jake shrugged. 'No, but she doesn't need to know.' He sipped his coffee. 'Like he's much of a dad to the champ anyway.'

'Well, we know this, but Ren insists that Jimmy dotes on Curtis.' Willem raised his hands, warding off the derision that was about to erupt from Jake's mouth. 'Yes, we know it's bullshit, but you ever tried telling her that?'

'Have you?' Jake asked pointedly.

'Of course,' came the sharp reply.

'Sure you have. Like never.' Jake finished his coffee and walked it over to the sink. 'I love you, mate, but I keep telling you, you need to grow a backbone. Bitching to me about it really isn't doing Lawrencina any good.'

'Fine, I'll shut up then.' Knowing how sulky that sounded, and not really caring much, Willem picked up his mug and walked out of the kitchen.

'Yeah, real mature, buddy,' he heard Jake mumble.

Willem narrowed his eyes but didn't respond. Instead he flopped down on his chair and threw his feet on the stool. By the time Jake entered the lounge the TV was on. *In the Night Garden*, the digital box having been left on CBeebies when he'd

taken Curtis out earlier, was preferable to the little tiff he was having with Jake. And that it was a silly little tiff was not lost on Willem, but for reasons he didn't want to entertain, he was irritated by what Jake was saying.

They didn't fall out very often, but when they did, it stung.

'Will, I wasn't saying you should shut up. That's like hundreds of miles out from my point.' Jake sat himself on the couch, and waited for Willem to turn the TV either off or down.

For a short while he refused to do so, instead he continued to watch as Makka Pakka went about the Night Garden washing everything he came across with his sponge. Jake cleared his throat, but still Willem refused to budge.

'Okay, you just sit here sulking. I'm sure when Curtis wakes up he'll give you a conversation worthy of your newfound maturity.'

Once Willem heard the back door shut, he turned the TV off, but still remained sitting there, gazing at nothing. He really was in a funk. Normally when he felt like this the first person he'd turn to was Jake, but...

He sat up and reached into his pocket for his phone. He'd apologise to Jake for being a twat, and assuming he hadn't pissed Jake off too much, then within minutes he'd be back and the two of them could talk.

Willem knew his funk had nothing to do with the whole Ren and Jimmy issue, as much as that ticked him off it was pretty much business as usual, and sure Jake had hit a sore point about Willem's bitching, but still that was not the issue. Jake and he shared pretty much everything, all the big stuff, and what was developing between him and Charlie was pretty damn big.

He needed Jake in on this.

Just as he flipped open the phone, it vibrated in his hand and a message alert appeared on the screen. It was Charlie. He opened the message and read:

hey, u still busy if not im online still

With the broadest smile he'd probably ever wear, Willem reached for the table and dragged it towards his chair, all thoughts of Jake having evaporated.

He glanced up at the ceiling as the laptop powered up; he just hoped Curtis would stay asleep for at least another half hour. That would be ample time for Willem to show Charlie his secret scar.