

THE  
BLOOD  
DEBT

**Other Pyr® titles by Sean Williams**

---

***The Resurrected Man***

***The Crooked Letter, Books of the Cataclysm: One***

THE  
BLOOD  
DEBT

BOOKS OF THE  
CATAclysm TWO

Sean Williams



an imprint of **Prometheus Books**  
Amherst, NY

Published 2006 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

*The Blood Debt, Books of the Cataclysm: Two.* Copyright © 2006 by Sean Williams. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, digital, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or conveyed via the Internet or a Web site without prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr

59 John Glenn Drive

Amherst, New York 14228-2197

VOICE: 716-691-0133, ext. 207

FAX: 716-564-2711

WWW.PYRSE.COM

10 09 08 07 06 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Williams, Sean, 1967-

The blood debt / Sean Williams.

p. cm. — (Books of the cataclym ; 2)

Originally published: Sydney, Australia : Voyager, an imprint of HarperCollins, 2005.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59102-493-4 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-59102-493-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

I. Title.

PR9619.3.W5667B66 2006

823'.914—dc22

2006020965

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

To KIM SELLING,  
for reacquainting me with magic

“The Void Beneath is a horrible place. A ringing emptiness infuses it, an endless hum that scrubs the soul clean. Imprinted on this eternal drone are the minds of the lost, clinging to their memories like life rafts. Despairing and desperate, the Lost Minds smother new arrivals with pleas to hear their stories—for if they are forgotten, they inevitably die.

“Among the Lost Minds is one they call the Oldest. The Oldest One bade me listen to his story, and I did. Sometimes I wish I hadn’t. If it is true, then even the most outlandish tales in the Book of Towers are based soundly on fact. If it is not true, then we are as much in the dark about our past as we ever were. Even now, years later, I am still unsure which of these two possibilities is the more terrible.”

*Skender Van Haasteren X*



Seth remembered: the Flame imploding and the two Sisters being sucked into it; ekhi breaking into Sheol and Ellis escaping on a brilliant, hypnotic back; mountains closing in over a dark, hunched shape and three slender glassy towers entombing them all. Through the chaos, a green figure strode calmly toward him and whispered softly into his ear.

“Peace, Seth. This is neither our first meeting nor our last. In your future, the Goddess awaits.”

The bubble of the world burst, and a new topography swept over the land.

“Remember us, Seth,” Horva insisted from very far away. “Please, remember us . . .”

Sandwiched in the knot that had once been Bardo, the twins rolled and tumbled. They weren’t in the First Realm; they weren’t in the Second Realm; they were between, holding the worlds together like glue. A hum swept over them like the breathing of an ocean, smoothing them out and removing their sharp edges. The void pressed in until only echoes of their lives remained.

They had bent worlds to their will and travelled the darkest of ways; conversed with gods and with those who would be gods; walked in the company of monsters and angels. They had killed.

Time passed, and they knew it not.



# THE WARDEN

---

**“On the matter of the ghosts, we find that their presence comprises no direct threat to the citizens of the Haunted City. Only when summoned can they do any harm. In order to deter such a summoning, necromancy will remain a Category A crime, punishable by expulsion from the Haunted City.**

**“Therefore, on the matter of Shilly of Gooron, we find her guilty of necromancy and recommend that she be punished accordingly. She may live freely in the Strand provided she does not attempt to practise or teach the Change, or reenter the Haunted City. Any deviation from this course will result in exile beyond our borders.”**

JUDGMENT OF THE SKY WARDEN CONCLAVE IN EXTRAORDINARY SESSION,  
YEAR EIGHT OF THE ALCAIDE DRAGAN BRAHAM

**T**he young man looked out to sea.

As far as days went, this one was almost perfect. The sky hung overhead in a marvellous blue dome, marbled with clouds. The sea sighed with easy, patient rhythms. An effervescent breeze blew directly into his lungs from the grey expanses of the ocean.

He should have been content. But he wasn't. His skin tingled from more than just the salty spray. He would have been sunburned hours earlier, but for the protective charms daubed on his shoulders and back. The smell of rotting fish came strongly on the breeze. The pounding of the surf was relentless, day and night.

## || THE BLOOD DEBT

A seagull cawed in the distance, and he looked up sharply, feeling eyes on him.

*I'm not here*, he projected. He imagined the beach as it would look from the air: a ribbon of cream-coloured land separating the blue from the brown; him alone along its length—shoulder-length dark hair waving in the wind, an oval face with unremarkable features, apart from his eyes, which were shades of blue mottled with white flecks. His mother's eyes; and his adopted father's hands, weathered and calloused from plenty of hard work.

The seagull cawed again. Sky Wardens sometimes used seagulls as spies along the Strand. Whether this was one of them or not, he couldn't tell, but it paid to be careful. The beach he stood upon was a part of their endless, linear empire, and for Sal the sea had never been a friend.

Gently, so as not to raise more interest than he might already have, he painted himself out of the picture.

*Just a fisher. Not Sal Hrvati.*

Wheeling and diving, the seagull resumed its hunt for lunch.

Sal was hungry, too, but that wasn't the source of his discontent.

*Something's wrong, somewhere*, he thought. *I've been feeling it for days. But what does it have to do with me? Now?*

He closed his eyes and let the world rush into him. He forgot the seagull and the wind and the heat on his temples and the sea's stealthy creep. He exhaled, then inhaled deeply. A vibrant buzz passed through his bones. The Change was powerful and raw on the beach, where earth and ocean met. He could feel it in everything around him, as wilful and nebulous as air. Sometimes he would sit for hours and let his thoughts drift beyond the ephemera of everyday life. In the ebbing and flowing of the Change, he felt vitality and vigour that was equally beautiful in life and in death.

But not any more. There was a tear, somewhere—a tripping of the cadences of the Strand. It nagged at him, maddening in its ability to

pull out of reach when he tried to pin it down. He couldn't tell if it was a person or a thing, or something he feared to see in himself. As much a part of the Change as anything else, he knew he was far from infallible.

Sal glanced to his left at a grave marker on the edge of the beach line. The weatherworn post was inscribed with charms and encrusted with salt. *What would you tell me, Lodo? Am I imagining things or beginning to see clearly at last?*

He returned his attention to the sun and the sand and the sky. The wind danced fitfully around his legs, as though sweeping the way clean for a storm, but he could smell no rain, no thunder. The stone pendant around his neck, a weather charm called *yadeb-tash*, was silent.

Then it struck him—at once both physically and mentally. He cried out at a fierce stab of pain between his shoulder blades, and spun to look behind him. The beach was empty, except for him and the birds, but his eyes saw beyond them, through the rough fringe of scrub and into the gracefully towering folds of sand dunes that marched effortlessly inland. In the long moments he had been gawping at far-away fractures, he had completely overlooked something nearer and infinitely more precious. Close to home someone had tripped a trap.

“Carah.” He called the name as loudly as he dared. “Carah!”

His toes clenched in the sand and he began to run.

*Carah!*

The sound of her heart-name propelled Shilly out of a deep sleep she didn't remember entering. She had been dreaming of an outline of a face, or something very much like a face, although it seemed to have too many eyes and maybe an extra mouth. It belonged to something buried under the sand, something that was trying very hard to surface. It frightened her, and with her hands she had tried to sweep the impression of it from the sand. But sweeping the grains away only brought it to the surface faster than ever . . .

She sat up with a jerk. Sal had called her, and he had sounded panicked. It had been a long time since the last false alarm. Although they knew theoretically that they could be found at any time, it wasn't possible to live in a state of perpetual dread. Their jitters in the early days had settled down to a constant, low-level vigilance. Hiding was second nature to them now.

She didn't dare take the chance that he was jumping at shadows. Struggling free of her rabbit-skin coverlet, she shook off the lingering veils of sleep. The underground workshop, their home, was warm but not stuffy, ventilated by a chimney leading up through the compacted sand to fresh air far above. Kidney-shaped and high-ceilinged, the workshop had been fashioned decades earlier by a renegade Stone Mage who had come to Fundelry in search of new ways to master the Change. Instead of peace and quiet he had found Shilly, a girl with a knack for the Change but without the talent to use it. He had taken her as an apprentice and, on his death, left Shilly all his possessions. The workshop contained the trinkets he had made or gathered to himself down the years. Some she understood perfectly, grasping their purpose the moment she studied them, even though she didn't have the spark that would make them work. Others remained a mystery despite many hours of contemplation.

A flawed metal mirror caught her in its depths as she shrugged into the cotton dress she had worn the previous day and slipped on her sandals. Her dark hair stood in total disarray, bleached at the tips by sunlight. The same light had burned her skin deep brown, darkening what nature had given her still further. A series of thin white scars marred the skin of her right leg. The mirror had been dropped and was now warped on its left side, giving her a compressed, foreshortened aspect, as though she was walking into an invisible barrier. She didn't linger.

She grabbed the workshop's pole-shaped latchkey from its usual place and hurried through the tunnel which led her from the main room

to an antechamber. There was a wicked hook at one end of the latchkey and, on reaching a cave barely large enough for her to stand upright, she poked this into the sandy soil and twisted. Half of the latchkey vanished into the wall, as though tugged at by hands on the far side. She hung onto her end and firmly twisted the pole again. The charm had come with the workshop, one of those she hadn't quite fathomed, but she understood its operation well. Something clicked under her hands, and she raised her eyes to look into the dull, sandy wall.

A faint echo of the dunes outside the entrance to the workshop came to her, as misty as a dream. She didn't see the shape of the dunes so much as the *form* of them: the lines they made against each other, against the spindly grass that grew in their shadows, against the blurred horizon. She swept her attention along those lines, looking for any recent change. Birds appeared as swooping vortices, dimples in the sky; crabs were asterisks leaving complicated ellipses in their wakes; humans stood out like giant, dead trees on a fallow field.

*There.* She focused on a new feature of the dunes: a line of footprints marred the smoothly changing symmetry. Past them, just touching the low hills beyond the sand, were several parallel tracks that looked hauntingly familiar. *Made by wheels,* she realised. No hoofprints, horse or camel. Self-propelled, although she couldn't see the machine itself.

A chill went through her. The view flickered. While the reservoir in the latchkey lasted, she followed footprints into the dunes, seeking the person who had made them. Her gaze skidded over a discontinuity and lost the trail. She backtracked, and skidded again. The person making the tracks was deliberately hidden from her sight.

She had just enough time left to see Sal hurrying from the beach. His trail was hidden, too, subtle and barely visible but as familiar to her as the dunes themselves. He angled around the interloper, coming up from behind.

*Be careful!* she thought, even though she knew he couldn't hear her.

The latchkey gave out, the store of the Change within it consumed

by the wall's charm. She was left on the wrong side of the exit, anxious and blind. What to do? She couldn't just sit in the workshop like a rabbit in its hole waiting for the trap to spring.

She had seen enough, though. The interloper was approaching from a point near the outer edge of the dunes. That left him or her, most probably, with no line of sight to the workshop's entrance. If she was quick, she might just get through without being spotted.

She took a deep breath and withdrew the latchkey. It slid freely from the sand, unhindered by the arcane mechanism it operated. Turning to another section of empty wall, she outlined a figure eight in the soft soil. With a sigh and a shower of sand, the wall collapsed, leaving a metre-wide hole in its wake. On the other side of the hole was the back of a bush. Beyond that, sunlight and the dunes.

Shilly hurried through, carrying the latchkey with her. The white sand glared bright in the daylight. The smell of salt and spear grass was sharp in her nostrils. She squinted to check around her before running away from the exit, erasing her footprints with her free hand as she went. She ducked out of sight at one end of a wide dune-valley just as a flash of blue fabric appeared at the other.

*A Sky Warden? So far from the Haunted City?* It wasn't Selection time for months, when the young of the village were examined for Change-sensitivity or talent. There was just one other conceivable reason for a warden to be in the area. Shilly forced herself to confront the awful truth: that she and Sal might have done something to give themselves away.

She held her breath and hoped Sal would stay out of sight. The last time Sky Wardens had come to the dunes, her life had been turned upside-down. Pain shot along her right leg, from hip to ankle, and with a worried look she reached down to rub at it.

Unnatural silence had fallen over the dunes. Sal's hearing seemed muffled as he moved to catch up with the person who had triggered the

early warning charm on the dunes' northeastern perimeter. Just as thick fog could dampen sound, so, too, could sufficient skill deaden the Change.

That thought sobered him. The chances were that this person was better trained than himself; not someone from Fundelry, then, or a wandering weather-worker, foraging for driftwood. For all the natural talents he possessed, subtlety was not one of them. He couldn't just rush in and hope for the best.

He inched around the outstretched limb of a dune and caught his first glimpse of the person he pursued.

A thin young man with black, curly hair and ebony skin strode confidently towards the workshop entrance. He wore the bright blue robes of a Sky Warden. A crystal torc hung around his neck—a sign of rank, Sal remembered. Over his right shoulder drooped a black bag shaped like a teardrop. Its contents swayed heavily from side to side.

Whoever he was, he crossed the sand with long-legged strides, making no obvious attempt to conceal himself.

The bush camouflaging the entrance to the workshop stood out against the wall of sand behind it, a suddenly pathetic hiding place, even though it had served Lodo well for many years. Sal had felt the entrance open and Shilly scurry for freedom, so he was spared the worry of her being trapped inside. But that wasn't the limit of his concerns. If the Warden found their home and reported it to the Syndic, they would be forced to run again. And he wasn't ready to leave the one place he had felt at home—not yet.

Sal reached out through the Change, fighting the interference radiating from the trespasser, and touched the second line of defence. The buried traps stirred, awaiting his command. They had grown in the years since he had placed them in a series of concentric semicircles around the entrance to the workshop. They throbbed with readiness, swollen and angry like bees ready to defend their hive.

The Warden stopped in his tracks and looked around.

Sal ducked out of sight and slithered to a new position. The Warden turned his head from side to side, as though seeking the source of a faint sound. His expression, when Sal got his first good look at it, was one of intense concentration.

Sal went to duck again, but froze. There was something familiar about that face, those long features and dark eyes. He had seen them before. Or *had* he? He'd met only a few Wardens during his ill-fated stint at the Novitiate, five years ago, and none since. Would he remember any of them from that far back, even if his liberty depended on it?

The Warden straightened upon one last inspection of the dune valley. He swung the pack off his shoulder and put it on the sand by his feet. By accident or not, he had stopped just before the concealing bush.

The Warden raised his empty hands and turned in a full circle.

"Come out, Sal and Shilly," he called, speaking slowly and loudly. "I know you're here."

Sal rolled over and flattened himself hard against the sand, staring desperately up into the sky. Sky Wardens didn't necessarily need their hands free to cast charms any more than he did. The Warden's gesture of peace was purely symbolic and therefore meaningless, but symbols had power. So Lodo had tried to teach him years ago, and Shilly had reinforced the lesson many times since.

Silence choked the air over the dunes. The wind had died completely; not even the seagulls dared brave the sudden stillness.

Sal didn't know what to do.

"Who are you?" came Shilly's voice from the other side of the Warden. "What do you want?"

Sal peered over the dune, alarmed by the thought that Shilly had put herself in danger. He reached out for the buried traps as the Warden turned to address the area that Shilly's voice had come from. It wasn't too late. She was far enough away not to be hurt.

“What’s the matter?” the Warden asked, his words echoing from the walls of sand. “Don’t you know who I am?”

“I know *what* you are. That’s enough.”

“No, it’s not.” The Warden made no move, except to sag a little. “I dreamed last night that you and I were riding a ship of bone up the side of a mountain, into a cave of ice. Something dark and ancient lived there, under the ice, and it knew we were coming. It had slept for an eternity, but was waking now, and it was hungry. We had to stop it, you and I, before it ate the world.”

Sal listened, hooked by the same odd sense of familiarity he had felt on seeing the man’s face. The Warden’s voice had changed while talking about the dream; it was higher pitched, and had a childlike rhythm. Sal had heard someone talk like that before, under very different circumstances.

For the first time, Sal noted how dusty the Warden’s robe was, his scuffed and worn boots.

The name, when it came to him, was as unbelievable as it was a relief.

“Tom?” Sal stood up on the crest of the dune. “Is that really you?”

The Warden turned away from Shilly’s hiding place to look at him. Now that Sal knew the truth, he could see the resemblance. Gone were the awkward ears and lack of height. Gone were youthful uncertainties and baby fat. In their place was a lean, almost ravenous, sense of concentration that hit Sal like a physical force as Tom’s gaze fixed on him.

The teenager Sal had last seen as a boy didn’t smile. “Who else would I be?” he asked, appearing genuinely puzzled.

A surge of relief carried Sal down the side of the dune. “It’s been such a long time,” he said. “I didn’t recognise you.”

“You look the same.”

“Thanks, I think.” Tom’s equine features took on a younger cast as Sal neared him. Under the dirt, he had pimples. Sal held out his hand. Tom’s grip was uncertain, fleeting.

“What in the Strand brings you here?”

Tom looked over his shoulder as Shilly came out of hiding. She didn't look as relieved as Sal. Favouring her weak right leg, she leaned on Lodo's latchkey in lieu of a staff.

Tom turned back to Sal. “It's your father,” he said.

The heat of the day vanished at those three words. “What about him?”

“He needs your help.”

“He sent you to find us?”

“No.” Tom shook his head emphatically. “I came here of my own accord. No one knows.”

Shilly looked from Sal to Tom when she joined them.

“A cave of ice, huh?” she said. “That's not a prophetic dream; it's the sort of nonsense normal people have.”

Tom opened his mouth to respond, then closed it. Sal could practically hear his mind working. Brilliant in the ways of the Change, Tom struggled when it came to everyday matters.

“It will happen,” he said. “That's the way it works. I thought you'd remember, after the golem and Lodo and—”

“Easy,” she said, a look of sadness clouding her features. “I remember. I just don't understand how it could ever be possible. I haven't seen ice in my entire life, let alone a *cave* of ice. The nearest mountains are half the world away, and I'm in no hurry to get there. As for hungry things wanting to eat you and me . . .” She put her hand on his shoulder. “Be assured that this is one fate I'll try my level best to avoid.”

Tom didn't argue, although her answer obviously didn't reassure him.

“Why don't you come inside?” asked Sal, indicating the bush and the entrance to the workshop behind it. The deadness over the dunes had faded; the wind had returned. “You look like you could get out of the sun for a while.”

“Yes,” added Shilly, “I’ll get you some water, make you some tea.”

Tom nodded, but stayed where he was. “Tell me,” he asked Sal, his dark eyes very serious. “What would you have done if I hadn’t been me?”

Sal looked at the ground around them, wondering how much Tom had sensed. Woven in a thin layer just under the surface of the sand was a pattern of interlinked charms designed by Shilly and willed into potency by Sal. The charms—resembling insects with circular bodies and crosses for heads—caught light filtering through the grains above them and held it there, the pattern growing increasingly powerful with every day that passed. At a word, Sal could release the stored energy in the light-traps and send it flooding back out into the world. He didn’t know how much energy, exactly, there was in the traps, but definitely more than enough to kick up a dense sandstorm, allowing Shilly and him to escape under cover. Probably enough to blow a person standing on the light-traps to pieces . . . There was only one way to find that out, and fortunately he had been spared such a decision this time.

“Don’t worry about us,” he said. “We know how to look after ourselves.”

Tom’s dark eyes took him in with one long glance. Sal’s assurance was one thing Tom clearly understood.

Shilly tugged Tom forward, her sun-bleached hair dancing. He allowed himself to be led up the slope of the dune, first picking up the heavy bag and draping it back over his shoulder, then dragging his leather boots through the sand.

“Come on down,” said Shilly, waving their old friend ahead of her along the secret passage into the workshop. “Tell us everything you know.”

“That could take days,” he said. “I’ve been dreaming a lot lately, and not just about you. I think Skender might be in trouble, wherever he is.”

## 20 THE BLOOD DEBT

Shilly glanced over her shoulder at Sal. He rolled his eyes. Nothing had changed.

“What we *need* to know, then. Let me get you a drink, and then you can get started.”

Sal came last, ignoring the sensation of being watched as he closed the door behind him. The birds on the dunes were the last things he had to worry about now.