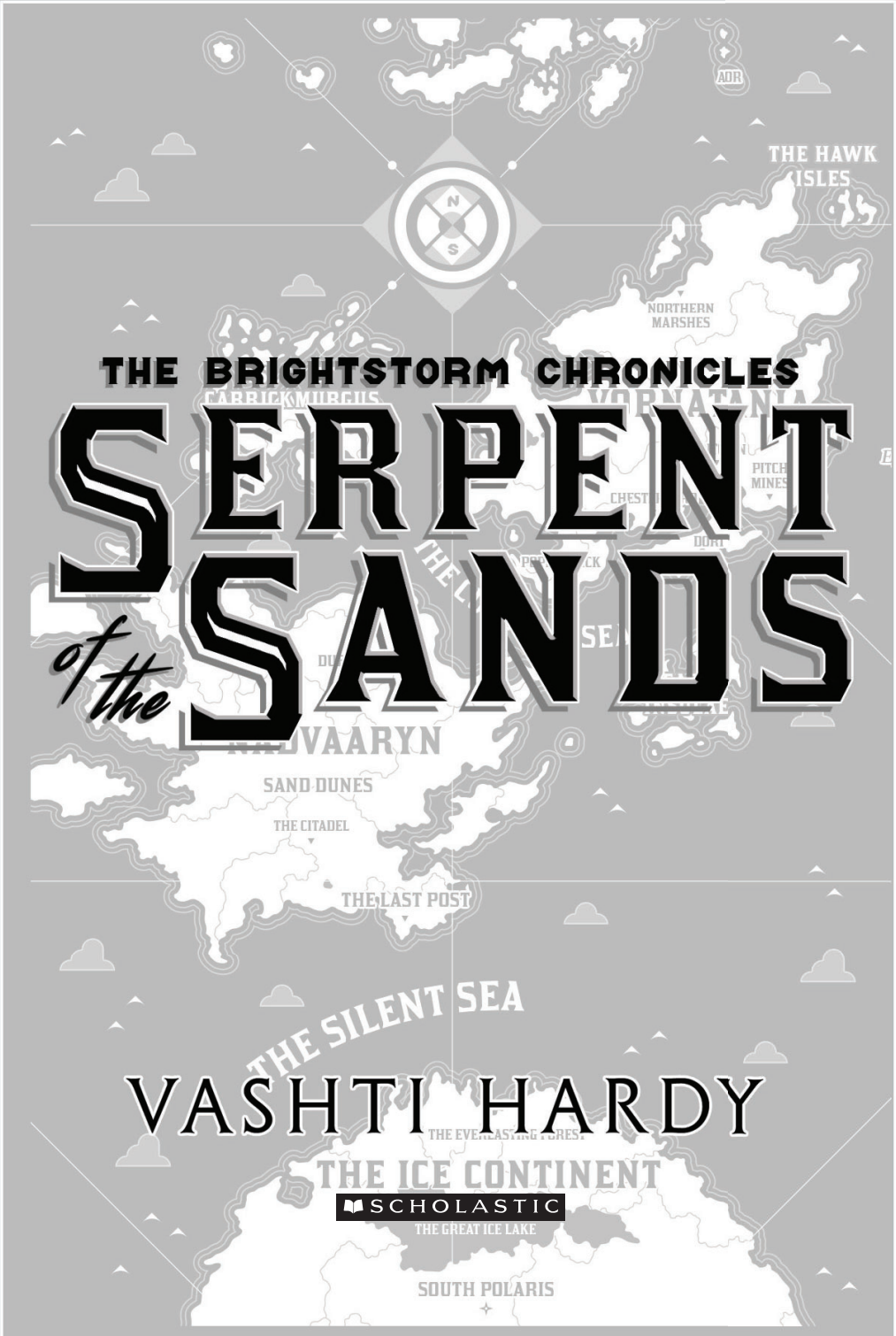


THE WESTERN WIDE



THE BRIGHTSTORM CHRONICLES

*of the* SERPENT SANDS

VASHTI HARDY

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For Harvey, Sienna, Naomi and Elana

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*“The beat of the eight is strong, strong,  
Forged from the roars of time.  
Hum! Hum! Thrumming high,  
It calls, we call, the Firesong.”*

Excerpt from a traditional folk song  
recorded in the Volcanic North





## TEN YEARS AGO

“Serpent, *pleeease*, Mama?”

“You’ve heard it a hundred times, Gan.” Etugan pressed her finger softly to the end of her daughter’s nose.

Gan turned hopefully to her father. “Papa?”

“I’m afraid I’ve forgotten how to read,” Askaa teased with a smile. “But I have remembered that you sneak sugared almonds from Batzorig’s study, *and* where you hide them.” He slid his hand under her silken pillow. “Wait... Is this what I think it is?”

Gan shook her head as her father pulled a gleaming arrow from beneath her pillows. It was as long as Gan was tall. “Zayaa will have to watch you more closely.”

“Or give her lessons.” Etugan winked.

Gan nodded keenly, her brown curls bouncing.

“Perhaps.” Askaa joined the fingers and thumb of one hand together and began twisting and undulating his arm, snake-like. “After the serpent has punished her!” He began tickling her, and Gan giggled until her belly felt so full of joy she thought she might burst like a firework into the Wide.

Etugan lifted the weighty green book from the end of the bed, where Gan had heaved it earlier. “Let me see.” She flicked through the pages. “‘The Whispers of Memory’, ‘The Tale of the Tiger’, ah, here we are: ‘The Serpent of the Sands.’” Gan grabbed her favourite doll, Barrin, from beside her and clutched it to her chest as she gazed wide-eyed at her mother.

“What have you dressed Barrin as today?” asked Askaa.

“Explorer.” It was a tricky word, but Gan had mastered it.

Etugan grinned. “Best not tell Temur. You know how my brother likes us all to stay close to home, and your uncle Batzorig is the same!” Then she leant in. “But we must look after your little explorer Barrin, and I know a secret: the one thing that all explorers need.”

Gan’s eyes widened even further.



“They feed on adventure!”

Gan let out a gasp of delight.

With that, Etugan began to read:

*In an age when the first creatures walked the Wide, the leader of the sapients, Hara, made eight protectors of the land and sea. All lived in harmony, each with a unique gift to help them maintain the balance of the Wide, all except one. When Hara had asked the serpent what gift she would like, the serpent dithered and dallied and could not decide. While she faltered, the rest of the great sapients were already using their gifts to keep balance.*

*Hara paid the serpent a visit. Humans were falling ill with all manner of ailments, so Hara bestowed upon the serpent a healing cactus garden and charged the serpent with its protection. For a time, the serpent aided the humans in need, but the humans became greedy and began faking sicknesses so that they might get more healing cacti to sell. The serpent lost trust in the humans and hid itself and the cactus garden, until one day a child was found wandering alone and crying, for he was gravely ill. The serpent took pity on the boy and showed him the secret garden, and his life was saved. The boy revealed he was a human prince of the land, and in thanks he swore to keep the serpent's secret.*

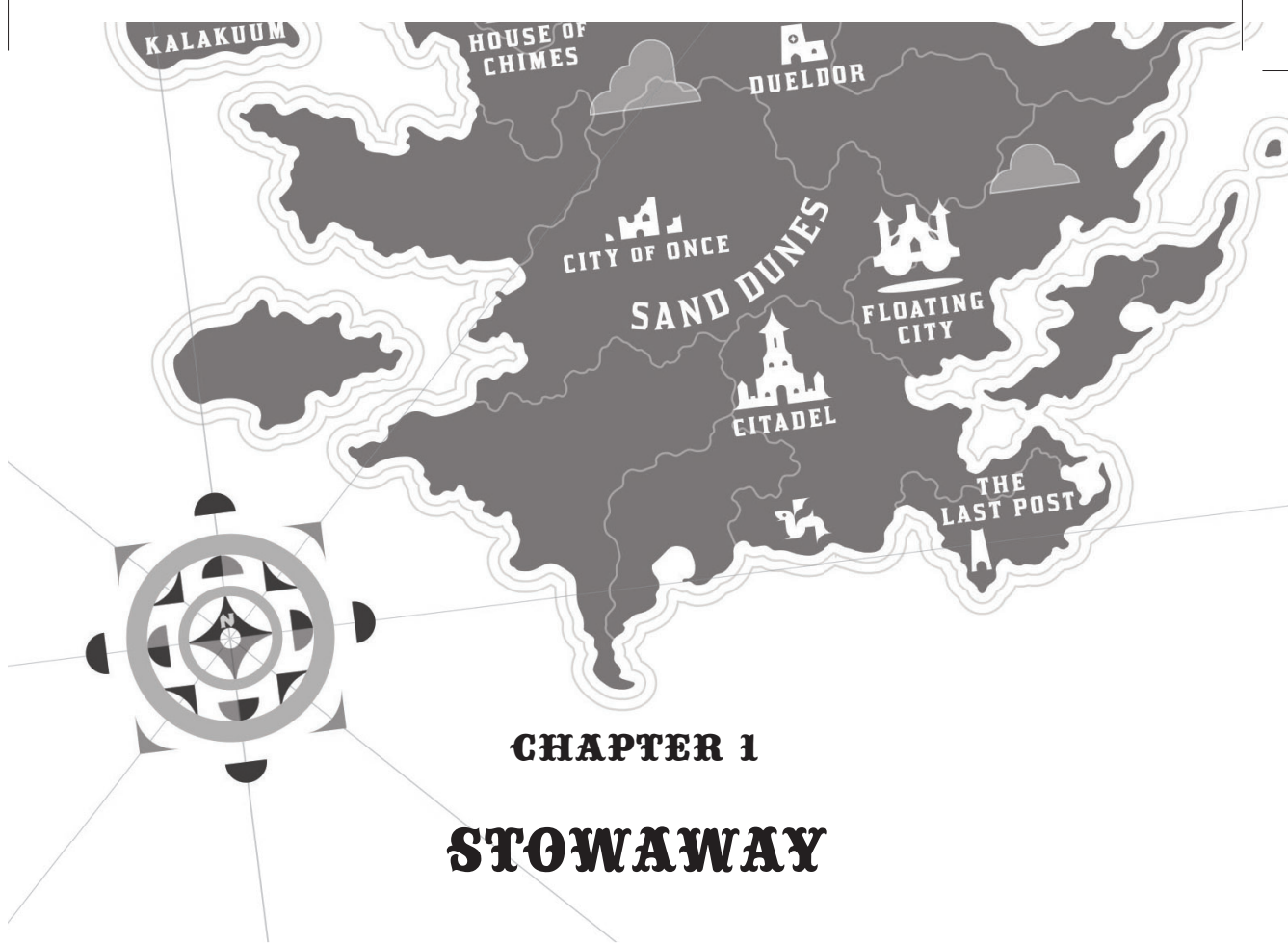
*While he recovered, they exchanged stories and laughed and cried as one, becoming the best of friends. Together, the serpent and boy forged a wayfinder, a charm that would always lead the prince back to the serpent if he ever needed help in times of grave need.*

*But a royal advisor, Balthazaar, betrayed the boy and stole the wayfinder, calling the serpent and setting a trap to steal the precious healing plants once and for all. Armed with a thousand swords, a battle ensued, raging from sunset to sunrise until the serpent, spent from the fray, sank, helpless, into the sand.*

*Then a light appeared on the horizon, for the prince had arrived, only the smallest of boys, yet armed with his arrows, fury and love for the serpent, he admonished the army and drove them away. The prince reclaimed the wayfinder and the healing plants and gave them back to the sapient. Horrified by the danger he had put his friend in, the prince broke the wayfinder into four pieces, destroying the charm.*

*As the prince scattered the fragments throughout the land, he called to Hara to send in a terrible storm to bury the whole kingdom in sand.*

*No one would ever find the serpent again.*



## CHAPTER 1

# STOWAWAY

Thorn woke with a start to the jarring clang of brass. A few paces away, a mariner, clad in oilskins, released the bell rope, then unleashed a voice, salty and deep as the sea.

“Chime’s warning to set sail!”

From nearby came a tumult of cheers and the clink of tankards.

Dusk had fallen and the ancient harbour was bathed in an eerie blue grey. Rugged fishing boats bobbed beside larger trade vessels, neglected by time, wooden masts swaying to the rhythm of the wash, their craggy once-white sails drooping below. Their heyday had long since passed; sky-ships were the way now.

Thorn was hidden by a barrel, wedged in a slim alley at the mouth of the port of Wetstone between a tavern, the Maggot and Hook, and a fish store, Wetstone Mariners Ltd. To his right, a row of ancient fishing cottages lined the harbour's edge, their thick stone blending with the cold wet path of the harbour wall. To his left, the shops, which had been bustling when he'd arrived, had their shutters down, and beyond that, in the distance, were the glitzy night lights of a sky-ship dock.

The mariner disappeared into the tavern. The slam of the door stirred the air, kicking up a noxious seafood reek. Thorn's clothes were damp and he shivered. His short hair stuck to his forehead in large, thin curls and slow rivulets of mist-clinging water trickled down to his collar. He hadn't meant to sleep, but the journey had been long and exhausting, though he'd barely started. His belly ached for food and he wanted desperately to break into his backpack of supplies, but he'd eaten when he arrived and he had to ration.

The tide had been out to the sand flats, yet now it was tickling the top of the slipway, the surface of the sea slow dancing with dusty moonlight. The passage ahead felt unfathomable. Was he really going to do this?

He found himself watching the boats resentfully. Soon it would be him out there, further away from home than he'd ever been. Yet he had no choice. He tried to work out how he'd got here from Lontown, but not much made sense in his home city these days. One thing was certain: there was little left for him there now.

So much had changed in a few short years.

It seemed like the weight of the Wide had fallen on everybody.

All was quiet. Now was his chance.

Thorn stood, his knee joints seizing from being still for too long. He had always been slim, and he felt the cold more than most; at this moment his bones felt brittle by it. But as he braced to dash for the boat, he heard footsteps, fast as a hungry rat, pattering swiftly towards him through the fog. In seconds he'd ducked, his stomach muscles tensing as he prepared to be found.

He looked up into the wide eyes of a girl, perhaps twelve years old, a year younger than him. She had the look of a ghost, with ashen skin, bedraggled hair to her hips, and a grey dress to her feet in old boots that were too big.

“Move over, will you,” she said, squeezing into the

alley beside him. She pointed to the nearest boat. “Is that the *Minnow*?”

Observing her with distrust, Thorn shrugged. He knew it was the *Minnow*, the boat due to set sail for the nearest continent, but if he was going to stow away, he couldn't risk a tagalong. He'd heard that others had crossed the Culldam Sea: Nadvaaryn didn't blink an eyelid at strangers, but stowaways on boats, if they were discovered by the crew, may never reach their destination.

“Don't you talk?” She peered down at him as though he was a curious specimen, but he supposed after travelling four days on foot and sleeping in the bushes, he probably didn't look much better than her.

Nestling into the thin space beside him, she sighed. “Got any food?”

He eyed her suspiciously and clutched his backpack. She looked thin and hungry. Perhaps he *should* share something.

She shrugged. “I'm gonna stock up on offcuts anyway. There might even be some old crab claws in their bins, if you wanna share?”

“Are you thinking of leaving today?” he asked tentatively, with a nod in the direction of the boat.

She smiled, showing gapped front teeth. “So you

*can* talk, after all.” She tilted her head from side to side. “Maybe. I’ve been trying for five nights, but the weather’s been too choppy. This evening looks still enough, and even with the sea fog the captain seems keen. I heard him say something about no choice and picking up his imports before they spoil. Or perhaps he’s worried about being nabbed by the shadowgrabbers like us Slumps kids!”

Thorn shivered. The rumour of shadowgrabbers had spread throughout Lontown these past six moon cycles. First in whispers, then cases were reported in the *Lontown Chronicle*. And it wasn’t only children being taken: adults too. Mainly from the Slumps of Lontown because people sleeping on the streets were easy pickings. Everyone there lived in perpetual fear.

“You’re a curious-looking boy. All grim-faced, like you’ve got doom written on your skull.”

If only she knew. Thorn’s mum had once told him he’d inherited her dark serious eyes, but he had his dad’s broad mouth that she’d said could fill a room with sunshine when he smiled. He just didn’t have anything to smile about right now.

The girl put one of her slight hands on his knee. “Don’t worry. We’ll be in Navary in a day or so. They

say the shadowgrabbers leave them alone there and that the sun is so hot, you could live in your undies!”

Thorn smiled. She was unlike anyone he'd ever met. Perhaps a travel companion wouldn't be so bad. “That's a good thought. By the way, it's not Navary, it's Nadvaaryn.”

She shrugged. Leaning in, she lowered her voice to a liquid whisper. “Were your parents taken by the shadowgrabbers?”

Thoughts of his parents knotted his insides. He wished they had been; then there would be a chance of seeing them again. He gave a little shrug.

“Seems like people have been disappearing real fast in Lontown lately.” She leant further in. “They say it's the sapients. But they'll have to catch us first, eh? There's not a place safe in Vornatania now. Not for the likes of us. We've got the smart plan heading across the sea.”

“Yeah, it'll be better in the south,” he said. “Away from all the bad things happening in Lontown.” It wasn't only the threat of shadowgrabbers that loomed on the streets, there was all the fighting and protests too. “It won't be for ever.” A knot stuck in the back of his throat.

She looked at him with narrowed eyes then



inclined her head as though he might be hiding something. “Wait. Have you got one of those illegal sapients? Is that why you’re running?”

Thorn grimaced. He certainly felt no affection for sapients after what had happened in Lontown with the super-sapient bear; as for the regular ones, he’d come across a few but he couldn’t imagine forming a connection with one.

“Pity. That could have made the journey fun.” She sighed. “The mariners will be out soon, we’d better get—”

Thorn put a hand to her mouth. Voices were nearing, although no one had left the tavern.

“The sky-ship should be stocked and ready to depart immediately,” said a woman’s voice, cultured and efficient.

“This town smells putrid. Honestly, Vittica, I don’t know why we couldn’t have left from the Lontown docks.” The second woman’s voice sounded sonorous, laced with disdain.

“The mission needs to remain under the radar of the *Lontown Chronicle*.”

They stopped, the taller of the two whipping around to stand, hands on hips, facing the other, in the direction of Thorn and the girl.

“Let them report it!” she snapped. “I’m tired of all this sneaking around while pretending to do things in the proper way.” She was dressed in a long black dress which had a hint of violet shimmer, her face alabaster white, apart from richly defined rouged cheekbones, dark brown hair, deep ruby lipstick and turquoise eyes, one slightly shaded by the undulating rim of a fancy Lontown hat.

The other woman, Vittica, was dressed plainly in a long brown overcoat, her hair pulled back severely in a bun. Thorn pictured her face to be as harsh as the other’s. She lifted her head slightly, with an action that Thorn imagined involved rolling her eyes. “Mercy, I’ve told you many times, the HAC needs to tread carefully.”

Mercy’s turquoise eyes seemed to twinkle in the mist. “For now.”

“It’s what Carinthus wants,” Vittica said warningly.

“I’m just saying, the sooner we achieve our mission, the sooner we can stop all this pretence.” She looked to the sky. “Where’s Sycorax?”

At the mention of the name, a blinking purple light appeared faintly above. The girl beside Thorn gasped as a raven swooped through the mist, wings swirling the air around, to land on Mercy’s outstretched arm.

Thorn shot the girl a look, urging her to keep quiet.

The raven sported a metal collar, an amethyst gem blinking at the throat.

Mercy spoke slowly to it as though giving instructions to a small child. “Go ahead to the sky-ship and tell them to start the engine. I don’t want to waste another second.”

The light on the raven’s collar flashed and it took flight in the direction of the sky-ship docks with the two women following.

As they disappeared into the mist, the girl jumped into the open and walked slinkily, emulating Mercy’s elegant gait.

“Hey, careful!” Thorn whispered urgently.

“Did you see that fine hat? That ruby lip smear?” The girl puckered her lips. “Do you think they’re going to Navary too?”

Thorn had been more curious about the raven than the hat or lips. “Come on. We need to get under the lifeboat of the *Minnow*. The mariners will be out soon.”

“Perhaps we should stow away on those ladies’ sky-ship instead!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Thorn hissed, despite himself. “Didn’t you hear her mention the HAC?”

The girl shrugged.

“You are aware of the Human Authority Collective? Don’t you know how dangerous it would be to stow away with them?”

She observed him with a wounded expression. “All right, I was just having fun.”

He knew first-hand that the HAC were a force not to be messed with.

A wave of mist thickened around them. Thorn stepped warily out of the alley, the girl looking more ghostly than ever in the fresh wave of white. “Come on. Let’s get to the *Minnow*.”

She nodded, but as they turned for the slipway they felt a rush of air hurtling in their direction. Thorn looked towards its source, panicked.

“What’s tha—” began the girl, but her words were seized as her body disappeared suddenly into the mist, as though she’d been wrenched by a great length of elastic. She screamed, but the sound was snatched away when it had barely begun.

Thorn gasped, looking frantically around as waves of wind swirled before him.

Then nothing – the mist itself thinned.

The hairs on his arms prickled. What had just happened? Heart thudding in his chest, he opened his mouth to call the girl’s name, but realized he hadn’t

even asked her for it. He ran a few steps to the place she had stood only moments ago. But all he could hear now was the muted chatter of the mariners beyond the tavern door, his own heavy breathing and one word pounding in his head: *shadowgrabbers*.

The door to the tavern began opening.

Without another thought, Thorn ran in the direction of the harbour wall. The lingering mist began clearing and he could see the lights of the sky-ships in the distance once more. In the harbour, he could just make out the name written on the closest boat's hull: the *Minnow*. Swiftly, he threw his backpack ahead, then jumped the distance between the harbour wall and the boat, landing as silently as he could, then made for the cover of the lifeboat on the far side of the deck.