

DJANGO WEXLER

City of Stone and Silence

Book Two: The Wells of Sorcery Trilogy



A Tom Doherty Associates Book
New York

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CITY OF STONE AND SILENCE

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Nothing takes longer than a meal you're eager to be done with. There are no guests at the house this evening, which means that the long dining room is nearly empty, our small table set cross-wise at one end with about a mile of empty floor mats beyond. On the far wall, the Blessed One smiles down at nothing from atop the house shrine, threads of smoke drifting up from the incense lit during the pre-meal prayer.

It's me, my tutor Ridatha, the house supplicator Narago, and the steward Ofalo at the table—not the most thrilling set of dinner companions ever assembled. Ridatha, at least, is interesting to talk to, with her endless font of stories and her rasping Jyashanti accent. Narago, needless to say, is a bore—*is there such a thing as a supplicator with a sense of humor?*—and his presence make Ridatha stay quiet, lest she say something heretical.

That leaves Ofalo, who's nice enough, but has a tendency to forget I'm not eight years old anymore. You'd think he could manage to remember when we're talking about my fourteenth birthday—coming in less than a month, Blessed be praised—but in between the salad and the baked smallfin I have to dissuade him from hiring a troupe of *clowns*.

Honestly, does anyone like clowns?

“Well,” Ofalo says, frowning—maybe he'd been looking forward to the clowns himself—“what sort of entertainment would you prefer, my lady? I believe there's a traveling menagerie that might be persuaded—”

Narago sniffs. “Only low people travel with such attractions.

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Best not to risk having them in the house.” He looks at me, posture perfect, his stark black-on-white robes stiff with starch. “Perhaps an excursion, my lady? I could arrange a private visit to Greatcliff Temple, and you could observe the theological debates.”

Monks arguing over whether the Blessed One’s left toenail is sacred in *itself* or only in *relation* to his divinity. Worse than clowns. At least you can throw things at clowns. I make a sort of *hmmm* face, because I can’t very well tell a supplicator that I’d rather throw myself under a cart. I get an inspiration, and turn to Ridatha.

“Perhaps a drama?” I say. “We’ve just been studying the theater of the High Imperial period, haven’t we?”

“Um,” Ridatha says, startled at my enthusiasm. I admit my attention starts to wander when she talks about High Imperial dramatic trends, but she gamely plays along. “I’m sure something could be arranged. High Imperial might be a bit . . . formal, but—”

“I’m sure something more modern would be fine,” I say blithely.

Ofalo scratches his nose. “Lady Amfala mentioned she hosted a troupe of players last week, and she said they were very fine. I’ll make inquiries.”

I heroically refrain from rolling my eyes. Any entertainment that withered old stick enjoys is guaranteed to be Upright and Moral and utterly bereft of anything interesting, but it’s still got to be better than the monks. Besides, the only thing that really matters about my birthday is that Isoka will come to visit. Usually I don’t know when to expect her, but she never misses a birthday.

Conversation moves on to the price of grain, what the rain has been doing to the garden, and the latest gossip from the Royal Ward. As always, I’m amazed at Ofalo’s ability to keep up an inane conversation almost single-handedly, with an occasional assist from Ridatha or pious interjection from Narago. You’d think that he’d eventually have to acknowledge that important things were going on outside the high brick wall that surrounds the garden. Isoka pays him a lot of money to pretend that the rest of the world doesn’t exist, and he’s good at it.

Or maybe it’s Ridatha’s presence that makes things awkward. After all, it’s her people that we’re getting ready to go to war with.

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The only interesting moment comes, oddly enough, from the supplicator's carping. His duties require him to return to the Grand Temple in the Royal Ward on certain holy days, and apparently traffic there has slowed to a crawl.

"I waited nearly an hour," Narago says, with a sniff. "In my ceremonial robe, which is stifling. And when we finally reached the temple drive, it was blocked by a gang of miscreants trying to grab everyone's attention."

"What did they want?" Ridatha says, as she methodically removes bones from her fish.

"What the lower orders always want," Narago says. "To enjoy the fruits of the Empire without having to pay their fair share or fight to defend it."

"Maybe they just don't understand why defending the Empire means people have to die on some island a thousand miles from here." I mean to mutter this under my breath, but it comes out louder than I intended, and Narago looks at me sharply.

"Defending the Empire," he says, "means defending the Empire's interests, and the Emperor's honor."

"Small honor in being chained to an oar for twenty years," I say.

Narago reddens. "Perhaps you'd prefer the Jyashtani sailed into Kahnzoka and put us all to the sword?"

"That is *enough*," Ofalo says. "These are not subjects for the ears of an innocent child."

Narago harrumphs, but gives way. He glances at Ridatha suspiciously. "Perhaps some more study of the history of Jyashtani aggression against the Empire is in order?"

"Of course, supplicator," the tutor says, lowering her head.

Wonderful. I manage to keep my sarcasm to myself, and the rest of the talk is determinedly trivial. Eventually, finally, the fruit course comes, and I'm released from this low-rent torture. I gobble a handful of grapes, for form's sake, and get up as fast as my *kizen* and decorum will allow.

"My lady," Ofalo says, "a pair of musicians arrived this morning and asked for the honor of playing for you. Would you hear them? They come well recommended."

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“No, thank you,” I tell him, with just the right inclination of my head to indicate apology-to-an-inferior. “I’m feeling poorly tonight. I think I’ll go to bed early. But please, have these players perform for the staff, with my thanks.”

Ofalo’s dark eyes watch me thoughtfully, and he strokes his beard. I have to be careful, he’s far from foolish. If I say I’m feeling poorly too often, I’ll end up rushed off to the doctor and placed on a purgative diet or assigned calisthenics. Fortunately, it’s been a while since I needed to make excuses, and Narago helps out with a distraction.

“Musicians,” he sniffs. “Are we really to be imposed on by such vagabonds?”

“These are quite reputable,” Ofalo says, a little irritated. “I am assured—”

I make it out into the corridor as they get into it, walking with the narrow, shuffling gait the *kizen* allows. I pass servants heading the other way, and smile at Irana, who’s just a few years older than I am and always wears a fresh flower pinned in her hair. She gives me a bow in return, and a smile where the older maids won’t see.

Back at my room, Pakala is waiting, and it takes me a few minutes to assure her I don’t need a bath drawn or my hair combed or anything else for the evening. She departs, still sounding unconvinced, and slides the door closed behind her.

Alone. At last. I let out a breath.

My room is not the largest in the house, which still bothers Ofalo. When I was twelve, he offered to vacate the master’s suite for my use, but I declined. I could use the space—Ridatha always tells me there’s too much stuff in my room, and a cluttered space makes for a cluttered mind—but I can put up with a little junk in my brain in exchange for the other advantages. The master’s suite is at the center of the house, letting directly onto the main courtyard and surrounded by servant’s quarters, whereas my current room is at the far end of one of the wings, separated from the outer wall by only a tall hedge and a narrow strip of garden.

There’s also a closet, tucked into one corner, and because of the shape of the servant’s kitchen on the other side it happens to

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be very narrow and deep. It's like a little tunnel that doesn't go anywhere, lined with wooden shelves holding my clothes, beautiful silk *kizen* and more casual embroidered robes. Squeeze past those, and there's a pile of spare bedding, folded mats and blankets. Squeeze behind *those*, I discovered, and there's a little nook at the very back, a soft, secret nest of threadbare blankets and pillows. It's a perfect place to keep things you don't want anyone to find.

I take off my *kizen*, unwinding the knot and the long sash at my waist, and fold it carefully for the maids to clean. Working my way back to the secret nest raises clouds of dust, and I rub my nose to stifle a sneeze. In among the ancient blankets, there's a chest, a battered old thing I'd rescued when Narzo the gardener was going to put it out for the dustmen. I flip the lid and pull out another set of clothes—rough trousers, a linen shirt, a leather jacket, a big lop-sided cap.

I can't actually pass for a boy anymore, not up close, but I'm a lot less likely to draw attention like this than shuffling along in a silk *kizen*. I dress quickly, and take a few moments to pin my hair—which normally falls well below my waist—into a tight bun before pulling the cap over it.

I don't like lying to Ofalo. But he'd never let me out of the house without an escort, let alone allow me to visit the lower wards. Isoka pays him well to keep me safe, and I love her for it, but sometimes this place makes me want to scream. Not that I would ever tell *her* that, of course, after all she's done for me. So I lie, and I try not to get caught.

It's easier than it looks. For me, anyway. In the dark, quiet space at the back of the closet, I close my eyes and let my thoughts open. The house comes alive around me, full of bright, humming minds, and I can see every one.

I can't read thoughts.

It's not like *reading* at all, really. I don't have words for what it's like, because how can you explain that to someone? It's a little like

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seeing, a little like hearing, a little like tasting or smelling or feeling something press against your skin. And not like any of that at all.

It took me a long time to realize what I could do—what I *was*. I don't remember exactly when my power came to me, but it was before Isoka got us off the streets, when I was six or seven. (Later, I would learn this is unusually young for mage-bloods, who more frequently come into their abilities in their early teens.) At that age, I just accepted it as a fact of life, like the cold and the hunger. I could look at people and see what they were feeling, hear the pitch of their emotions, sharp, tangy anger or despair like a cold breath across the back of your neck. I could tell, sometimes, when someone was lying to me. I could feel Isoka's pain, and how much she loved me, the diamond-hard weight of her determination.

When her own abilities came, she made me promise never to tell anyone, ever, about what she could do, and I felt the barely restrained terror in her mind. Not long after, she brought me here, and told me I was going to live with Ofalo, the tutors, and the maids, and that she'd visit as often as she could. I cried, but I could feel how much she was hurting, too.

It wasn't until my tutors were hurrying me through my basic education, making up for lost time, that I learned to put a name to my power. *Kindre*, the Well of Mind, one of the Nine Wells of Sorcery. I read what I could about it, but there wasn't much to find. Kindre mage-bloods are so rare as to be practically legendary, with decades passing between each new user, and scholars are constantly speculating that it will become the next Lost Well. The stories about what it can do vary widely.

Whether my power makes me merely a talent or a full adept, I have no idea. As much as I can, I try to avoid it. Aside from the practical reasons—if the Immortals found out what I was, they'd drag me away to serve the Emperor—it just feels *wrong*. It's a violation, intruding into other people's most private spaces, like having the ability to see through everyone's clothes or read their diaries.

Unfortunately, sometimes I don't have many other options.

It's not like I'm trying to look *inside* anyone, not really. I just need to see where they are, and a little bit about what they're paying at-

tention to, so I can get by them. It's not reading a diary, it's just noticing where the diary *is*.

I have a feeling Isoka would laugh at my little sophistries.

From the back of the closet, I can feel three servants chatting in the kitchen, a maid in the hall checking the lamps, a watchman in his covered booth on the roof. The last is of most concern to me, but his post faces the main entrance, not the back, and his mind already has the oily patina of drink.

I squeeze back past the folded mats and into my room. A large window overlooks the narrow strip of grass, between this side of the house and the wall, split by a gravel path leading to the rear gardens. It's real glass, smoked for privacy, and it hinges up and out. Checking one more time to make sure the watchman isn't looking this way, I climb up onto the sill, turn around, and carefully lower myself down, grass tickling my bare feet.

I keep my boots here, tucked behind a bush against the wall, so as not to tip anyone off with mud stains on the floor mats. They're big, stompy boots, hard leather with steel plates around the toe. I love these boots. Perversely, there's something *freeing* about them—wearing the soft shoes that accompany a *kizen*, I don't dare step off of the groomed paths, but in these boots I can go anywhere. I tie them up with mounting excitement, and use a long stick to push the window mostly shut.

That's the easy part. The hard part is the outer wall, nearly ten feet high and topped with a decorative iron railing. Fortunately, not far from my window there's an old willow tree, its bent branches hanging low to provide easy handholds. This wall faces the lane between my estate and Lady Amfala's, and the wall is more a notional defense than a real one. Still, it's a scramble, and I swing one leg over and take hold of the railing before dropping down.

What makes it tricky isn't the height, it's the watchers. The guard on our own roof is mostly for show, but there are other minds watching the house at night. Sometimes one, sometimes two or three, perched in a tree across the lane or crouching in a shadowy corner. Their focused attention stands out to my Kindre senses, strobing blue and peppermint.

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They work for Isoka, I think. She doesn't trust Ofalo. I guess she doesn't trust anyone. I feel a little bad about fooling them, since they're only trying to protect me, but once again I don't have any other options. There are two of them tonight, and I watch their minds, timing my ascent for when their attention is elsewhere.

I must have made some unexpected noise, because I can feel one of them look back in my direction just as I cross the wall. I react automatically, reaching out to the distant watcher's mind. It's only a tiny push, honestly, a wash of fatigue and boredom. I feel the observer yawn, and their attention slips over me, like ice sliding across a hot griddle.

Yuck. Touching someone's mind like that is . . . *urgh*. Imagine sticking your hand in a fresh, steaming pile of horse turds in the street. I want to withdraw my senses as quickly as I can, but I don't dare stop watching the watchers, not until I'm clear of the house. Fortunately, the lane is empty, just a narrow dirt track with high walls on both sides, leading back to the rear garden gates. I slip out along it to the main road, a broader, winding throughfare slashed with wheel ruts. Two torches burn by the entrance to the main drive, but nothing marks this little back way, and I sneak off without anyone the wiser.

Once I'm away from the house, I let down my guard a little. It doesn't matter if someone sees me now, as long as they're not looking close. I live in the Second Ward, high on Kahnzoka's hill, with only the august heights of the First Ward separating us from the Imperial presence himself. The streets are curved and tree lined, with large circular stones engraved with family crests marking the entrances to the walled estates. Rich families mean servants, and while most of those servants live in the households of their masters, there are always day laborers and temporary replacements coming and going. Nothing unusual about a young woman in shabby clothes trudging home to the lower wards at the end of a long day.

Our street joins another, which leads, after several turns, to a gate. The ward walls, formidably high and broad enough for two men to walk abreast, are manned by the Ward Guard. I remember the Ward Guard with a hint of terror, from our days in the lower

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wards—brutal enforcers of order, who cared little about the people under their protection, always on the lookout for a chance to extort a few coins. Here in the Second Ward, things are different. If I were dressed as Lady Tori of the Gelmei estate, they would bow and scrape, but even as a poor laborer they're more polite. You never knew which maid might have the ear of her mistress, and plenty of families in the Second have enough pull to get a poor guard arrested.

Cabs gather at the gate. I find a two-seater heading for the Eleventh Ward, already occupied by an older woman with a long woolen shawl and a cheerful expression. She shoves over and I climb up beside her, passing a couple of copper bits to the cabbie with a nod of thanks. The horse snorts and starts moving, and we pass through the gate, gleaming spikes of the portcullis hanging threateningly overhead.

Then we're out, onto the broad thoroughfare of the military highway, joining a stream of carriages and pedestrians. I take a deep breath. My gardens smell of willow and fresh-cut grass, sharp and clean, but this is the real scent of Kahnzoka—dung, smoke, and the press of humanity. I give the old woman a grin, and she grins back.