

THE
Place Between Worlds



BOOK TWO OF THE WALKERS TRILOGY

C.B. Williams

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The Place Between Worlds:

Book Two of the Walkers Trilogy

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For my Readers

without you, my stories remain silent

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Chapter 1 - Mog

The Place-Between-Worlds was shrouded in mists that swirled on windless currents. Somehow the mists moved through nothing but a damp, quiet stillness. The trees were tall and twisted, with brittle, bare branches, fingers that raked the milky mists that streamed through them. It was a dark, grey, sullen forest smothered in a twilight world of silence.

Every Walker knew not to linger in the Place-Between-Worlds. In and right back out was the best approach. Things lived in the Place-Between-Worlds, dangerous and angry creatures. Nobody knew how many or even what they looked like beyond glowing eyes. Those who lingered to find out were never heard from again.

Into the stillness came a slight, vibrating thrumming from one of the trees, causing its branches to clack together.

The sound carried through the smothering silence, as the vibration rippled through the mists. They swirled in an agitated pattern, and their agitation summoned the purple-eyed beasts.

A leather-clad leg stepped through the softened tree, followed closely by the rest of a young woman. Her thick, red-gold braid danced behind her as she swung her head this way and that, searching for the tree that would take her to the next step in her journey.

Her left hand held her sword's scabbard loosely to keep it from clattering. Her right hand was held up and already beginning to glow, the sign of a Walker at work. The light illumined pale, thin scars on the backs of her knuckles. Countless nicks from countless practices and a few deadly duels, the scars were the badge of a Sword Maiden whose duty was to defend her king at all costs, even her life. And there were countless other silvering scars on her body, a body that moved like water.

A tree near her began to vibrate, and the Sword Maiden whirled towards the source of the sound. Another Walker was beginning to emerge. A slow grin spread across her face, and she darted into the tree she had readied, ending her brief visit to the Place-Between-Worlds.

This new Walker was more adept. With barely a thought, barely a flick of his hand, he was through the Place-Between-Worlds, disappearing into the wake of the first Walker's trail. He tackled her as he travelled through the portal, and they tumbled out of the next tree and into their destination together. Rolling once, he straddled her, pinning her arms to the ground, his long black hair spilling around the young woman's face like a dark, velvet curtain.

His hair tickled, and she twisted this way and that to get out of its way.

“Yield, Maiden!” he said. “I have caught you, and you now are mine.” His jade green eyes lit with anticipation.

The young woman hooked a flexible, strong leg about his waist and twisted, reversing their positions with one fluid motion. Pinning his arms to the ground, she let her braid plop onto his handsome face. Her sword clanked as she adjusted her position.

“I will not yield! It is you who must yield, Walker!” She laughed as he bit her braid and mumbled some retort. “What?” she asked with a chuckle. “You’re talking with your mouth full, Ash. Don’t you know that’s rude?”

Ash spat out her braid as he sat up and gathered her in his arms, “I said, Kate, that I will always yield to you because you have captured my heart.”

She sighed and leaned against him, loving his scent. He smelled of leather and rain and trees. She put her arms around him and hugged him close. “You say the most beautiful things,” she murmured into his shoulder as he stood up with her still in his arms and then lowered her to her feet.

His arms tightened. “It is because I have Bonded with the most beautiful of Sword Maidens. I am inspired by her daily.” He gently held her away so that he could see her face, unaware that his happiness and contentment mirrored her own. “Shall we report to the Council?”

She pretended to pout. “I think I’d rather report to our tent,” she said with a saucy wink. “Or at least find Joey and tell him we’re back. It’s been three days.”

“I do not think that there is need to find Joey,” he said with a slight smile, his eyes focusing behind her.

Kate turned, and with a laugh went down on one knee, arms open wide, just in time to receive the bullet of a two-year-old hurling himself into her embrace. She stood up, happily cuddling toddler king Ioho, her own little Joey, loving his chubby arms wrapped about her neck, and round, rosy cheek pressed against her own. “Oof!” she exclaimed, as she hoisted him, “you have grown, Wonder Kid! I’ve missed you!”

Joey looked at her with the same jade green eyes as Ash, who was Kinsman to this king who had been prophesied for ages. “Kate,” was all he said, and he smiled his joy before holding out his arms to Ash. “Ash!”

“Ioho,” Ash replied, somehow conveying both teasing affection and reverence as he lifted the boy from Kate’s arms. “Come, it is time to report.”

* * *

The Battle Hound stood among the swirling mists, sniffing at the footprints left by Ash and Kate in the Place-Between-Worlds. A

deep growl rumbled from its chest, sending out a new vibration to eddy through the agitated mists.

The Battle Hound was massive. Its enormous shoulders rose four feet from the ground, and looming another foot above that, rising from a thick ruff surrounding its throat, was a wide, square head with heavy jaws and sharp teeth that could rend flesh and crack bone effortlessly. Its coat, surprisingly soft, was a swirled pattern of greys and white, blending perfectly with the mists and trees. The purplish blue eyes, now glowing at the scent of its prey, sparked with intelligence and cunning. The Battle Hound was a patient hunter. It never failed to capture its prey.

With an deep, booming, angry *woof* the great grey beast whirled on its haunches and began running through the mists, through the trees, weaving in and out, scarcely noticing the occasional brittle branch tugging at his coat as he took a corner too sharply. As the trees thinned, he ran faster. Soon he was on a high plateau, which was barren save for the occasional granite outcroppings that jutted like broken teeth from the earth. The light was the same translucent white as the forest, but brighter. The mists were thinning as well, all but gone. The stillness remained. The only breeze was created by the Hound, as it thundered through the still air.

Other creatures lived on the high, wide plateau, using the outcroppings as dens. Some of them were predators as well, but none bothered the Hound.

Without missing a stride it howled, a sound much like that of a wolf. Soon, another Hound bounded up and ran beside him. Then another, then four more, until the pack was once more assembled. They ran silently, creating wind as they passed, their breath rising and falling in unison. The Battle Hound, Mog was his name, was the largest of the seven and their leader. As was his right, Mog ran in front. As was his right, Mog set the pace.

On the distant horizon was a mountain range. It was foreboding and dark, with tall spires of saw-toothed rock and deep, hidden caves.. When the pack could see the valleys and dry river beds that wove through the rocks, Mog changed course a bit, aiming towards one particular valley. They still had many miles to traverse, and Mog maintained a pace that was steady yet swift.

The plateau came to an abrupt conclusion at the edge of a 30-foot cliff, but Mog barely slowed as he zig-zagged his way down a narrow trail of switchbacks, the pack close at his heels. The footing was precarious, and they slid from time to time, their large paws sending up puffs of dust and knocking off bits of loose rock and stones that pinged and echoed as they fell down the steep embankment. Stealth was not important this far from the woods. Speed was.

Descending from the plateau, they came to a wide plain that once had been lush and verdant and dotted with the great herds of plains animals. Now the packed ground was cracked and arid, smelling

of decay and smoke. The mists barely touched this area, and the visibility was unimpaired. Mog homed in on the faint trail that headed directly to the valley like the shaft of an arrow. They crossed the plain in single file, a line of white and swirling fur against the dark, thirsty earth. Even if they had wanted to, there was no place for them to hide.

It would have taken most animals two days to cross the dead, dry plain. For Mog and his pack, it took only ten hours. When they finally reached the valley's entrance, their tongues were dry from panting, their great sides heaving. They stopped in the never-ending twilight to rest and to get a drink from a tired spring that had somehow managed to create a shallow pool of muddy moisture. One of the pack dug through the mud to make the pool larger. They fell to lapping, licking the mud after they had drained the pool.

Mog lay down as he waited for the spring to refill, ears pricked, nostrils flaring. Finally finding the scent he was seeking, he let out a sigh and gruff *hrrumpf* of satisfaction. He rose to lap gently from the now-filled pool, careful to avoid stirring up the mud. The liquid was sweet and cold.

The rest of the pack had flopped on their sides to rest, trusting their leader to keep them safe. After a few minutes, Mog let out a soft *yip* which sent the pack to its feet, ready, as always, to follow Mog wherever he led them.

They set off up through a narrow valley flanked by grey and black granite walls that towered some fourteen thousand feet into the air. Had they had snow on their peaks, they would have been spectacular. Towards the end of the valley was another cliff with a large, flat outcropping that jutted approximately sixty feet out over the valley floor. This was where Mog led his pack, up ancient stairs carved into the stone. When they arrived, they found themselves on the lip of a great cave, a huge, yawning, dark opening into the side of the mountain. It was decorated with the script of a long-dead language carved deeply into the stone.

Mog and his pack sat in a semicircle around the opening of the cave to wait.

The Ancient One knew they were there. The Ancient One would come in its own time. A Battle Hound did not make demands of the Ancient One. A Battle Hound merely waited and obeyed.

Chapter 2 - The Ancient One

As Ash and Kate walked toward the Brendt encampment they were greeted with waves and hoots of congratulations. A newly Bonded Pair was always an excuse for celebration, and after only three days, Ash and Kate were still targets of numerous jokes and congratulations. When they stopped in front of the main tent, a small crowd surrounded them with laughter and hugs.

The tent opening parted and Brann, Leader of the Brendt, stepped out into the throng. “So this is why the commotion!” he exclaimed, his bearded mouth curving upwards. Hands fisted on his hips, he rocked back on his heels. “Are you needing some lessons on taming a Sword Maiden, then?” he asked Ash. The crowd guffawed as Brann’s own Sword Maiden and Bond Mate yanked on his braid, causing him to stagger back and nearly fall.

“That should teach you to be rude, that it should, my liege,” Lady Faith commented with a twinkle. She winked at Kate and nodded at Ash. “Welcome home to you both. We did not expect you this soon.”

Ash handed Joey to Kate in order to pay his formal respects to his liege lord and lady. Brann returned the fist-to-heart gesture and then clasped arms with his Kinsman.

Lady Faith hugged Kate, including Joey in her embrace. “This one knew you were coming,” she told Kate. “I should have listened to

him.” She glanced at Joey’s serious expression. “Aye, I won’t be making that mistake twice,” she told him.

The two-year-old shrugged and tucked his head under Kate’s chin with a grin. She kissed the top of his head, inhaling his sweet scent and smiling into his hair. “Joey knows things,” she murmured. “He always has.”

“So, what did bring you back?” asked Brann, beckoning the two Walkers inside with one hand and waving the crowd back to work with the other.

“We have news,” Ash replied, allowing Faith and Kate to enter before him. His eyes followed Kate as she brushed by him. “Council business.”

Brann glanced at his Bond Mate, raising an eyebrow. “Is that so?” he asked, sinking into a nearby chair and waiting for the others to get settled. He cocked his head at Kate. Glancing at her sword, he cleared his throat.

“Oops, sorry,” she said, reddening. She handed Joey to Ash and unbuckled TinneHolm from her waist, laying it down beside her in accordance with protocol, as Ash had already done.

Brann grunted.