

Child of the Stones

by Paul McAuley

At night, the past has a stronger hold on London than the present. The urgent beat of daily business stalls and drifts backward. The city's inhabitants lock themselves in the prisons of their homes and the vacant streets stretch away in every direction under the thin orange glow cast by long, regular lines of street lamps, their silence haunted by echoes of the dramas of past generations. But some of London's streets are never quiet. Queensway; Hyde Park Corner; Old Compton Street in Soho; the streets around Victoria Station; the Embankment; Upper Street in Islington: people are drawn to these places at night, and it is to these unsleeping streets that many of the dead are also drawn, by habit, hunger, and forlorn curiosity. Lately, it was where I spent most of my nights, too, walking amongst the living and the dead.

Although the matter of the dead has been my business for as long as I have lived in this great and terrible city, during those nocturnal rambles I was interested not in the ghosts, imps, and other ordinary revenants I encountered, but in what they might attract. Six months previously, I had discovered that there were new and terrible things awakening into the world. Things that preyed on the dead, and drew strength from them; things that were beginning to prey on the living. Lions and tigers and bears. The unsleeping streets where the cities of the living and the dead intersected were beginning to draw the attention of these new predators, just as a watering hole in the African veldt draws the big cats that prey on the buffalo and zebra and gazelles that come there to drink. It was while I was mapping this strange new bestiary that I discovered that not only monsters were awakening in these strange times, and a door onto my past opened and an old enemy stepped through it.

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Islington, Upper Street, summer, two hours past midnight:

A bare-chested young man with a bright green Mohican haircut, his arms ropy with tattoos and track marks, was sitting in the doorway of an estate agent's office and sharing a can of lager with a young woman in a ragged black dress and army boots. Imps clustered around their eyes like tiny scorpions, pale, articulated, and fat with the venom of heroin dreams.

In another doorway, a man slept jackknifed under a filthy blanket, guarded by a starveling mongrel who looked at me calmly when I dropped a couple of pound

coins beside his master's head. The man, an old acquaintance, stirred and without waking mumbled, "Mr. Carlyle. Take care."

It was good advice, and I should have taken it. For the past three nights, I had been intercepted by a pair of men in an immaculately restored blood-red Mark 1 Jaguar. Each night, the big car had purred up to me as I was making my way home, and the man in the passenger seat had leaned at the open window and spoken to me about a book in my possession, a rare volume his employer wished to buy. Each night he had offered more money for the book, and each night I had refused his offer. I knew that sooner or later he would try another tactic—most probably some kind of violence. I had not yet seen the Jaguar that night, but I was certain it would appear before I gained the safety of my house, and anticipation of that encounter was like an electric itch at the back of my neck.

A club was closing a little way down the street. People stumbled past two black-suited bouncers into the night. A woman in a short white dress hunched on the kerb, crying. Another woman in an even shorter white dress had an arm around her shoulder and was trying to comfort her, unaware ofimps clustered in her friend's hair, thick as fleas on a sick cat. A woman pulled away from a man in a grey suit, tried and failed to hail a passing taxi, and walked away unsteadily while he shouted insults at her, angry black sparks jumping around his face. Three men in football shirts, arms linked around each other's waists, walked past me with the mechanical stagger of the very drunk. When I stepped aside to let them pass, the outermost gave me a flat stare that suddenly clouded with confusion when I pinched out the jagged little thing that had prompted his hostility.

Even as I completed the gesture, something caught my eye on the other side of the road. A small, scant figure slouched in the doorway of a restaurant, wearing tracksuit bottoms and a grey top, its hood drawn over a baseball cap. An imp as fat and sleek as a graveyard rat crouched on his shoulder, the end of its long tail knotted around his wrist.

I felt a prick of curiosity, and walked on for a little way before crossing the road, doubling back, and finding a vantage point of my own in the doorway of another restaurant. An old woman drifted out of the wedge of darkness behind me. She wore an old-fashioned bonnet and a shawl over a ragged black dress, and was so thin I could see right through her. Cast off long ago by an out-of-work seamstress who'd starved to death in some nearby attic or basement, this ghost was familiar, harmless, and occasionally useful to me. I asked her about the figure lurking in the doorway up the street, but she knew nothing about him, knew only that she was weak with hunger, if she could only get something to eat she would be as right as rain. I brushed her aside over and over again, as an ordinary man might fan away smoke, and each time she forgot my dismissal and drifted back, hoping that I was the kind of gent who might oblige with a penny or two toward the necessary, it had been so very long since she'd had so much as a crust to chew. At last, the hooded figure stepped out of his doorway and set off down the street. When I started after him, the poor

little ghost trailed after me for only a few steps before retreating to her haunt.

The hooded fellow was following an unsteady couple who, with their arms around each other, wove south down Upper Street, pausing to embrace and kiss at the point of Islington Green's triangle before turning into Camden Passage. He slouched along with hands in his pockets, stopping whenever they stopped to kiss, pausing at each street corner to check the lie of the land before moving on. Anyone else would have thought him no more than an ordinary cutpurse or thug intent on robbery or some other mischief, for they could not have seen the fat imp squatting on his left shoulder. I wondered if this young cutpurse was possessed by it, or if it was a kind of pet or familiar. And if it was a familiar, how had he tamed it, and for what purpose?

With mounting curiosity and more than a little eagerness, I followed the cutpurse as he tracked the couple through a street of early Victorian houses that ran parallel to the Grand Union canal (a man sat on one of the steps of one of the houses, sobbing over the bloody hammer in his lap; a woman stood at the window of another, her face a mask of triumph and despair as she cradled a baby's skeleton to her breast). The couple waltzed around the corner at the end of the street; the cutpurse paused for a moment before following them; I heard loud, angry voices disturb the profound quiet of the night, and hurried after him, pausing where he had paused, peering around the corner. The road crossed the canal a few dozen yards ahead; the couple stood at the crown of the bridge, confronting their pursuer. A locked gate to one side of the bridge guarded an access path to the canal towpath, and something lurked in the shadows there. It was the revenant of something or someone very old and, once upon a time, very powerful. It was possessed by an appalling hunger, and its attention was fixed on the imp that squatted on the cutpurse's shoulder.

The girl was telling him to leave her alone, her voice ringing shrill in the night. She was fifteen or sixteen, wearing a skimpy top and a short skirt that left her belly bare. Her fists shook on either side of her face. She was angry and afraid. "Just piss off, all right? It ain't anything to do with you."

Her companion, a shaven-headed, thuggish man in his thirties, took a step forward and threatened violence, but the cutpurse stood his ground. The imp on his shoulder vibrated with a sudden eager pulse, like a clockwork toy wound too tight. A nimbus of spiky black energies crackled around it, as a dog will bristle before it bites, while its master told the girl that she was making a mistake. "You shouldn't be going with him, Liz. It ain't right." His voice was high-pitched but steady and sincere, and it was exactly the wrong thing to say.

"Leave her alone, you little freak," Liz's shaven-headed companion said, and took two quick steps and threw a punch.

The cutpurse dodged the blow and flung out his left arm, like a hawk loosing his bird of prey. For all its sleek bulk, the imp was quick and eager, and flew straight at the man's face. But the thing behind the gate was quicker still. It had a long smooth

pale neck and a small head with jaws that disarticulated like a snake's, stretching wide and snapping the fat imp from the air and gulping it down whole. The cutpurse, connected by the imp's tail to the revenant which had devoured it, yelped with shock; the girl's companion saw his chance and hit him square in the face. The cutpurse sat down flat, his hood fell down and his baseball cap fell off, and I saw that he was a girl, with a thin pale face and blond hair unevenly hacked short.

The revenant's ghastly head quested toward her; she screamed and tried to pull away. The shaven-headed man, completely unaware of the apparition, kicked her in the side, and would have kicked her again if I had not stepped out, drawing my blade from my hollow cane.

"You have to be fucking kidding," the man said, staring at the yard of engraved steel in my right hand.

I stepped up and with a short stroke severed the umbilicus that linked the cutpurse to the revenant. It slurped up the cut end like a length of spaghetti and turned toward me. Whatever human qualities it might once have possessed had worn away long ago, leaving little more than a blind, bottomless appetite. For a moment, as I menaced it with my blade and tried and failed to dismiss it, it stood within my head, and I was jolted by a sudden, freezing headache. It reared back and stared at me; then its tiny, wide-mouthed head, like that of some species of deep-sea fish all maw and stomach, whipped sideways and snapped at the cutpurse.

"Your familiar," I said, countering the revenant's quick, sinuous moves with my blade. "It wants what's left of your familiar."

The man, still completely oblivious to the drama, believed that I was menacing him, and said he'd give me a right good kicking if I didn't fuck off. His girlfriend pulled at his arm and told him to leave it; after a moment, he spat at his feet, said that if he saw me again he'd make me eat my fucking sword, and, honour satisfied, allowed himself to be led away.

The revenant lunged at the cutpurse with jaws that were now as wide as a shark's. I caught her wrist, broke off the knotted remnant of the imp's tail, and threw it at the monster, which snapped up the trifle and withdrew as swiftly as thought. I ran to the crown of the bridge and looked over the parapet, saw something faintly luminous and very long pour into the canal's black water.

The cutpurse sat in the middle of the road, watching me walk back to her. My nose had started to bleed when the thing had briefly inhabited my head. I mopped up the blood with my handkerchief, folded it away, and held out a hand, and told the girl that she had best come with me.

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Although she had suffered a bad shock, the girl was blessed with youth's resilience, and soon began to recover what I had to suppose was her usual sullen defiance. From her more or less monosyllabic answers to my questions I learnt that her name was Miranda, that she was sixteen, that she lived with her mother in a nearby council flat, and that she and the other girl, Liz, were neighbours, and had both been left to fend for themselves because their mothers had gone away on holiday together.

"That bloke she was with only wants her for one thing," Miranda said. "That's why ..."

"You wished to help her. There's no shame in that. To care for others is an admirable quality."

"I was stupid," she muttered. "I could have got my head kicked in."

"And you lost your familiar, but I'm sure you can find another easily enough."

She glanced up at me from beneath the brim of her baseball cap. She was small and skinny and already hardened to the ways of the world; hers was a type that had not changed since the Romans had first made London the capital of the northernmost tip of their empire, a child "brought up on the stones," armoured with soul-scabs and premature cynicism. "How long have you been able to see things that others cannot?" I said.

"Don't know what you're on about. Don't even know who you are."

"I am Mr. Carlyle. I have the honour of being a consultant in the matter of the dead."

"Like a bloke that buries people?"

"In a way. And something like a private detective, too."

"Yeah, you look a bit like what's his name. Sherlock Holmes. Was that a real sword? Where are we going?"

"My blade is Damascus steel, and very old. Some say that its kind were quenched after their final forging by being run through the body of a slave, although I myself do not believe this fancy. In any case, it derives its strength from more than its steel, which is why I was able to help you. I won it a hundred years ago—you don't believe me, but it is true. As to where we are going, why, here we are."

We stood at the head of a brief, paved alley. When London had been no more than a huddle of herders' huts in a clearing on the hill now called Ludsgate, this spot had been the beginning of a path that had linked two sacred groves. Now it was blocked by a crooked little house whose ground floor was given over to a café. Warm light fell from its plate-glass window onto the plastic tables and chairs on the flagstones in

front of it. A neon sign boasted that it was open all hours.

"I haven't been here for a long time," I said, "but tonight it's the nearest haven. Even if you don't want any refreshment, we can at least sit comfortably while we talk."

"What have we got to talk about?"

"I can see everything that you can see. We can talk about that, to begin with," I said, and stepped inside the café. After a moment, to my immense relief, the girl followed me.

Fluorescent light shone on worn wooden tables and chapel chairs, the glass-fronted counter and its polished steel top. A man in a grey suit sat in one corner, toying with an espresso in a doll's-house-sized china cup; in another, a taxi driver studied an old copy of the *Financial Times*, his laminated license on a chain around the neck of his short-sleeved shirt.

Rose, the pleasant, round-faced woman of indeterminate age who had owned this place for more than a century, materialized from the shadows behind the massive coffee machine. Her silver hair was caught up in a bun with a pencil stuck through it. Her lipstick was bright red. Her smile was wide and warm and welcoming. "Mr. C! What a pleasant surprise. Will you be having your usual? And what about your friend? You both look in need of a refresher."

"We ran into a little local difficulty."

"Down by the canal, I expect," Rose said as she bustled behind the counter, slapping bacon rashers on a griddle, buttering two slices of white bread.

"You know of it?"

"It's been lying low in the Hackney Marshes ever since I've been running this place, Mr. C., but recently it's been growing bolder, if you know what I mean. Change is in the air, isn't it? Yours isn't the only old face I've seen recently," she added in a more confidential tone, nodding toward the man in the grey suit as he threw down some coins and left. "Foreigner, he is, but I've a feeling I know him from way back when."

I watched him walk away down the little alley. He was unfamiliar, but I could not help wondering if he had anything to do with the two men in the red Jaguar.

"He's been coming in about this time for the past week," Rose said. "Sits in the corner, drinks his coffee, doesn't say a word to a soul." She smiled at Miranda, who was staring at the taxi driver. "And what will you be having, dear? A Coke, perhaps. A little sugar does you good after you've had a shock. Much better than coffee or alcohol. You're lucky you fell in with Mr. C. He looks a little odd, I know, what with that black suit of his, and his bow tie and his hat and his cane, but he's the best of us."

I took off my Homburg and executed a small bow. "Why, thank you, Rose."

"Pishposh, Mr. C, I wouldn't say it if it wasn't true. That's why I'm pleased to see you out and about again."

While Miranda sucked on the straw stuck in her can of Coca-Cola, I squeezed brown sauce from the plastic bottle into my bacon sandwich, stirred three spoonfuls of brown sugar into my tea, and added a dash of brandy from my flask. I asked her about the imp she had made into her familiar, where she had found it and how she had mastered it, but she shrugged off my questions and took out a crushed pack of cigarettes and lit one. The left side of her face was reddened, beginning to swell from the blow she'd received. She blew out smoke and said, "You think you're a character, don't you? What with your fancy words and your funny clothes."

"Something happened just now, on the canal bridge. Something attacked you."

"If that bloke tries it on again," Miranda said with sudden cold ferocity, "I'll cut off his dick. I swear I will."

"You know quite well that I do not mean Liz's boyfriend. Did you see it, Miranda, when it took your familiar?"

"Don't know what you're talking about," Miranda said, but the hand holding her cigarette was shaking. I saw thin white lines on the skin inside her wrist. I saw oval white scars.

"You can see imps, and you can make them obey you. Your familiar was one such. You found it and trained it to do your bidding. That attachment grew a kind of leash or umbilicus between you and your pet, and it nearly caused your downfall. The revenant that ate your familiar swallowed the umbilicus, too, and for that reason you were briefly attached to it. You may not have seen it, Miranda, but I know that you must have felt its hunger."

The girl shrugged, and would not meet my gaze.

"You tried to use the imp you had captured and trained against the man. He wouldn't be able to see it, but it would have scared him away. I believe that you wanted to do it for a good reason. You wanted to help the girl. Is that how you always use the imps you make into your familiars?"

Miranda drew so hard on her cigarette that its tip crackled, and gave me a flat, challenging stare. She said, "What do they look like to you?"

"They are mostly black, and most of them are no bigger than insects. They are spawned by discharge of violent emotion, or by delirium induced by drink or drugs. The one you had tamed was exceptionally large."

"There's a bloke that lives near me. He drinks a lot, and he's always angry at something or other. His flat is full of 'em. Law courts are good places too. Lots of

fear and anger there. I get 'em to follow me, feed 'em up, get 'em to do what I want. It ain't so different from training a dog." Miranda drew on her cigarette again. "I suppose you're gonna give me grief about it."

"There are worse things in the world than imps," I said. "You met one of them just now."

"I see all kinds of things. People who aren't really there. Dead people. Ghosts. There's one over there, reading a newspaper. He's one of the harmless ones. I try to make them do stuff, too, but they don't listen. How about you? Can you make them do what you want?"

"You have a rare gift, Miranda, and it frightens you. It makes you feel that you are different—that there is something wrong with you. You punish yourself because of it. You cut your flesh with razor blades. You stub cigarettes out on your skin. You punish your body because you believe that it is betraying you. I understand, because I have that gift, too. I see the things that you see—"

"You don't understand nothing," Miranda said and crushed her cigarette on the table's scarred red Formica and stood up. Her can of Coca-Cola fell over, spilling a fizzing slick. "I don't know what your game is, but I want you to leave me alone. All right?"

I was surprised to discover that I felt disappointed by her rejection. As she turned away, I said, "If you want to talk to me again, come here, and ask about Mr. Carlyle. Will you do that?"

She kicked open the door open and walked straight out.

Behind the counter, Rose looked at me and shook her head slightly, but whether in amusement, sympathy, or disapproval it was impossible to tell.

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Ever since my parents died and I quit Edinburgh for London, I have spent most of my life alone, and for most of that time I have lived in a tall, narrow Georgian house in Spitalfields, at the edge of the City of London. It is a quiet, comfortably shabby place. The only modern improvements are the gas lighting and the gas geyser that, when lit, with much volcanic rumbling spits a miserly stream of hot water into the bath. The few ghosts that inhabit the house are harmless; they, and the mice in the walls, are my only company. I make sure that every threshold is well-protected, and I do not advertise for clients. Anyone in need of my services must find their own way to me.

The two men in the vintage Jaguar had not yet found my house, but for the fourth night in a row, as I was making my way home after my unsatisfactory conversation with Miranda, they found me.

Their blood-red motor car was parked at a bus stop opposite Shoreditch Town Hall. As I approached it, ready to draw my blade, the passenger door opened and the man who had accosted me three times before climbed out. He was in his forties, tall and wide, with a seamed complexion and a boxer's broken nose. His cream linen suit and mauve silk shirt looked expensive, but were rumpled and sweated through. He was beginning to get a beard, and had a dull, haggard expression. When I stepped around him, he walked after me. He did not quite dare lay hands on me—not yet.

"You're a stubborn man," he said, "but my boss is very patient."

"Others might say he is foolishly persistent."

"My boss wants that book very badly. He told me to do everything I can to make you see sense. You understand what I mean, Mr. Carlyle?"

He spoke flatly and mechanically, as if reciting something he had memorised.

"You can tell him that he is wasting his time. The book is not for sale."

I quickened my pace, but the man easily matched it. The Jaguar crawled alongside us. I glanced at the driver, but couldn't see his face through the slick of light reflected from the windscreen.

"My boss is generous with my time," the man said. "He's altogether a very generous man. And as such, he's prepared to consider any price you care to name. He told me to tell you that. I warned him, I said the man will rook you, but he doesn't care. Money means nothing to him. Why don't you get in the motor, Mr. Carlyle? We can discuss this in comfort."

"I think not."

"You don't trust me?"

"Of course I do not trust you. Also, I find all modes of modern transport uncomfortable."

"I noticed you like to walk everywhere. Dangerous, that. Anything could happen."

We had reached the junction with the A10, five lanes of newly laid tar macadam as black as deep water. A handful of pale ghosts were spaced alongside it, like herons along a riverbank. I stopped beside the traffic light, and the Jaguar stopped, too. The light was green; a white van sounded its horn as it swerved past and shot across the junction.

"You live somewhere near here," the man said. "Why don't we go to your place and talk about it?"

"Why does your boss send a puppet to talk to me?"

The traffic light above us turned red, and I started across the A10, moving between the handful of vehicles that accelerated away from the junction, racing each other toward the City. The man started after me, but had to jump back when a black cab nearly ran him down. I stepped past another black cab into the diesel wind of an enormous trailer truck and gained the far side of the road.

The man had retreated and was standing impotently beside the Jaguar. He shouted at me, his voice torn by the brute noise of the traffic. "We'll find you where you live! My boss, he doesn't give up!"

I could not resist lifting my Homburg in salute. I walked for another hour until the feeling of being followed finally slipped away, and I could turn at last for home.

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I wasted the next evening in a fruitless search for Miranda. A few of my usual informants knew of a girl who was followed about by tame imps, but none knew where she lived. "She spends a lot of time down King's Cross," one of them said. "Chases off punters with those pets of hers. They cruise up in their motors, looking for some short-time fun and games, and she leans in and lets them have it. They're all over the road when they drive off, crying and screaming."

It seemed that she had been frightening away kerb-crawlers for several months. When I asked my informant why he hadn't told me about her before, he gave the equivalent of a shrug and said that I hadn't asked.

"You must know that I would be interested in someone like that."

"Someone like you, you mean. I suppose so. But I see all kinds, Mr. Carlyle, especially these days. Things are waking up that should be long gone. *Hungry* things. I try to keep myself to myself these days, but it isn't easy, even here."

We had met at the edge of a patch of waste ground. On the far side, three men sat at a little fire they'd built from scraps of wood and cardboard, passing around a bottle of jake.

"Poor sods," my informant said. He was as thin as a wisp of smoke and leaned at an angle, as if bent by a high wind. "They'll be joining me soon enough."

I made my ritual offer to put him to rest; he made his ritual refusal. "I'm still interested in what's goin' on, Mr. Carlyle. Day I ain't, then maybe I'll call on your services and you can unmake me or whatever it is you do to make my kind vanish. But I ain't by no means ready yet."

I steeled myself to search the noisesome streets of King's Cross, had no luck, and walked up the hill to Islington. I failed to find Miranda there, either, and at last gave up and returned home. It was three in the morning. For once, there was no sign of the blood-red Jaguar, and when I reached the street where my house stood I knew why. I went carefully, as if walking barefoot on broken glass, to my house. All the wards I had set in place were broken, screaming in my mind like common burglar alarms. I had never felt the need to lock my front door in more than a century, but I locked it behind me after I had stepped into the familiar gloomy clutter of my hallway.

The three ghosts that shared the house with me were all in retreat. I drew out the Huguenot silkmaker, but he claimed not to have seen anything and fled toward the attic as soon as I released him. I lit a candle and climbed the stairs after him. I was certain that I knew who had broken into my house; sure enough, several dozen books of my little library of esoterica had been swept from their shelves and lay tumbled like the corpses of a flock of lightning-struck birds on the worn Turkish rug that covered most of the age-blackened oak floor. I lit the gas mantles and after a few minutes determined that only one book was missing.

It was the book that the man in the red Jaguar had wished to purchase—of course, the rarest, most valuable, and most dangerous of my collection. I had bought it at a public auction only twenty years ago, finally completing my recreation of the library which had been destroyed, with so much else, in the accident that had killed my parents.

My father had searched out and purchased most of the books in that library, but in most cases he had been carrying out my mother's instructions. She had inherited from her mother my family's interest and talent in the matter of the dead, and although he was as blind to revenants as any ordinary man, my father was happy to help her in any way he could. He was a small, neat man, and something of a dandy, famous for his crushed velvet suits and his elaborately carved pipes (I cannot pass the tobacconist shop on Charing Cross Road without pausing to breathe in the earthy odour that reminds me of him). Once I was old enough to accompany him on his rambles about Edinburgh, I quickly learned that he was on first-name terms with everyone from crossing sweepers to the Provost and knew every obscure nook and cranny of the old town. Although he had many friends, none were close to him, and most believed him to be some sort of a poet. He was not, but he was a great writer of letters, and included Byron and Keats amongst his regular correspondents; almost every evening would find him in his favourite armchair, wrapped in a silk dressing gown, a tasselled cap on his head, scratching away at a letter on the writing board propped in his lap, a pipe hanging from one corner of his mouth, a glass of whiskey at his elbow.

Although I have inherited so much from her, I have fewer memories of my mother. She was a practical, briskly decisive woman, absentmindedly affectionate, busy with her clients or in her laboratory, with its sharp chemical reek, scarred wooden bench

and hand-blown glassware, stained porcelain crucibles, a furnace built of brick and firestones, and intricate diagrams drawn on one whitewashed wall in black chalk and haematite. She provided me with a good grounding in the family business, and much else, giving me formal lessons each morning of my childhood and, when I was older, allowing me to attend the sessions with her clients. I remember best her sharply intent gaze and her shapely hands with their bitten fingernails and nicks and burns and chemical stains.

My mother and my father were as different as chalk and cheese, but they loved each other more than I am able to describe. They collaborated in experiments to augment my mother's natural ability; they died together when their last and most elaborate work released something feral and uncontrollably powerful. They had known of the danger and had taken the precaution of sending me away to help a client in St. Andrews, and so my life was saved. I have dedicated it to their memory ever since.

I had just finished reshelving the fallen books when I heard a sound elsewhere in the house, a rap on the front door only a little louder than a mouse's scratch. I drew my blade and picked up my candle and crept back downstairs, unlocked the door, and opened it a scant inch. Miranda stood there, her pale face set like stone under the bill of her baseball cap.

"I know who took it," she said.

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She gave up her story over a cup of hot chocolate in my kitchen. It was an assured performance, and even though I was certain that almost everything she told me was a lie, even though I could barely control my anger and anxiety, I had to admire her cool nerve. She told me that the night before she had hung around outside the café until I had left and had followed me as I had walked homeward. She had seen the encounter with the Jaguar, and had managed to keep on my tail as I had walked a long widdershins spiral to shake off any pursuers.

"I am growing careless," I said. "A few years ago I would have discovered you at once."

Miranda shrugged. She sat at the scrubbed pine table in my basement kitchen, her baseball cap in her lap, her hood pulled back from her cropped blond hair. There was a sprinkling of acne on her pale, sharp face, a faint moustache of chocolate foam on her upper lip. She was working on her third cigarette, stabbing it into her mouth, blowing thin streams of smoke from the side of her mouth, tapping off the growing ash with her forefinger into the saucer I had provided.

"I'm good at following people," she said flatly, as if stating her height or the colour

of her eyes.

"And tonight you followed me again."

I was angry and anxious, and I was also more than a little afraid of her. In the wrong hands, her raw talent could be very dangerous, and I was certain that she had already fallen into the wrong hands, that she was working for the man who wanted my book.

She shook her head. "I kept watch right here. I heard what that guy Halliwell said, so I thought I'd keep a lookout."

"Halliwell? Is that the man in the Jaguar? How do you know his name?"

The little minx had her answer ready; she did not even blink. "Donny Halliwell used to be a well-known face in Islington," she said, and mentioned a family that ran most of the protection rackets in the area.

"I presume that he is not working for them now."

"I heard what he said about finding where you lived, so I thought I'd better keep an eye out. I was right, too."

She looked at me when I laughed, and asked what was so funny.

"While you were here, keeping watch on my house, I was looking for you."

"Yeah? Why's that then?"

"Many people have a touch of our ability, Miranda, but a few have something more than a touch. In most cases, they are either driven mad by it, or they do their best to deny it and allow it to wither, like an unused limb. But one or two, although untutored, find a use for their gift. Usually, they become charlatans, preying on the gullible and the grief-stricken, and any good that they do is by accident. Very rarely, they actively try to use their ability for the good of others. That is why I was looking for you."

She shrugged.

"You wanted to help your friend last night. I believe that you have tried to help others. And you want to help me."

"I wanted to find out what you were about. I've never met anyone like you before."

"No, I don't suppose you have."

"And now I seen where you live, I know you're the kind of man who likes to keep himself to himself. You were looking for me because you were curious about me. You wanted to find out about me because you were worried about me—about what I was doing, about what I could do. But it's not like you want to be friends or

anything like that, is it? You're not the kind of man who has friends."

I was startled by how clearly she saw me.

"On the contrary. I have many friends."

"You let 'em come here? You hang out with them, chat with them about this and that over a drink? No, I thought not. You know people, but you don't have what you'd call real friends. What were you planning to do, if you found me? Give me some advice about how to live my life, like you did at that café last night?"

"I can help you, Miranda, if you'll let me."

"I can look after myself. Don't need no man telling me what to do. I was going to break into your house myself," she said, with a look that dared me to contradict her. "I would've, too, if that guy hadn't come along."

"Forgive me, Miranda, but I don't believe you. You were able to follow me without my knowledge, and that is no small achievement. But I don't think you could have overcome the wards I left in place."

"*He* managed it," Miranda said.

Someone had, at any rate. I doubted that it had been Mr. Donny Halliwell, of the glazed expression, the expensive, slept-in clothes, the sleepwalking menace. "If he did," I said, "then I am guilty of having grievously underestimated him."

"The way you talk. It's like the way you dress."

"You think that my clothes and my locution are affectations. I can assure you that they are not."

"Locution? What's that when it's at home?"

"It's the way I talk."

"It's a funny old word, is what it is. Old-fashioned. Like your clothes. Like this place. All this old furniture, and candles and such instead of proper lights." Miranda lit her fourth cigarette with a quick snap of flame. "You don't have a proper cooker, or a fridge ... I bet you don't even have a telly."

"When you are a little older, Miranda, you'll find that many people prefer the time in which they grew up to the time in which they find themselves."

"Maybe. But you didn't grow up in, like, Victorian times."

"That's quite true. When I first came to London, Queen Victoria had yet to ascend to the throne."

She looked at me. She wanted to sneer, but in her heart she was beginning to believe me. I took it as a hopeful sign: a sign that she could yet be saved. And even if I

could not save her, I thought, it was always best to keep your enemy close.

"Those of us who know something of the matter of the dead can be quite long-lived," I said. "If you are more careful in how you use your talent, Miranda, you might discover the trick."

"I could live a hundred years, could I? And not grow old?"

"Or you could step into the road tomorrow, and be run over by a bus."

Her smile was more like a grimace, there and gone. "I followed you, and you didn't have any idea, did you? Man like you, hiding away in this old place, you're not streetwise. I bet there's all sorts of things I can help you with. Maybe we can come to an arrangement."

When she had entered my house, squeezing past me at the door, I had taken the opportunity to pick the pocket of her hooded top. I placed her mobile phone and travel card on the table, and said, "You don't live as long as I do without learning a few tricks necessary for survival."

"I knew you took those," she said, but could not quite hide her twitch of alarm, and clearly did not know what I had done to her mobile phone, for otherwise she would not have put it straight in her pocket.

"You think that I am old-fashioned, which in a way is true enough, but it does not mean that I am out of touch with the world. And there is a good, practical reason why I do not have electricity here, or a telephone or any of the paraphernalia of modern life. Electricity attracts imps and other nuisances. You must know this. Look at any street lamp at night, and you will see more than moths whirling around the light."

"You didn't know who that the bloke who talked to you last night was. And I bet you don't know who Donny Halliwell works for these days, do you?"

"I am sure that I can find that out without your help. I have extensive resources, and a man who is able break my wards will be well known in the circles in which I move."

Miranda rose to my bait. "My mum knows all about him, and I bet she doesn't move in those 'circles.'"

"You wish to make a bargain, is that it? You will help me, and I will help you, turn and turn about."

"Shake on it," Miranda said, and stuck out her hand.

I smiled at her boldness and took her hand and shook it, knowing that the bargain meant nothing to either of us.

Miranda told me that Donny Halliwell had met a pop star while he was in prison. The

pop star, Rainer Sue, had been serving a short sentence for possession of a variety of Class A drugs; Donny Halliwell had been coming to the end of a longer sentence for extracting money with menaces from restaurants in North London. When he had been freed, he'd gone to work for Rainer Sue, now a recluse in his house in Cheyne Walk, one of Chelsea's most exclusive addresses, as a bodyguard and a general fixer.

"How do you know so much about these people?"

"My mum was keen on old Rainer when she was my age, back in the 80s. But he ain't done nothing in years and years except go to parties and film premieres and like that. My mum, she comes home with a few inside her or she sees his picture in *Hello!* or whatever, and she puts on one of his CDs and goes all smoochy. It's real bad stuff though, tinny synthesisers and like a drum machine and saxophones. Bad as in shit, not like in good."

"I know what bad means."

"I bet you don't. Anyway, that's why I know about Donny Halliwell, and about the Jag, too."

"The Mark 1 Jaguar."

Miranda pretended to be surprised.

"I do try to keep up," I said.

"Has personalised number plates, doesn't it? RA 1 NR. I see that straight away, and know who owns it. Anyway, the thing about Rainer Sue is that he's famous for being into weird shit. He wasn't exactly a Goth back in the day, but he dressed like Christopher Lee in those old Dracula movies, had skulls and coffins and lots of candles on stage, shit like that, yeah? I suppose he found out about you, thought you had something he wanted, is that it?"

"He wished to purchase a book that I own."

"Yeah? Like a book of spells?"

"In a way. The *Stenographia* is the masterwork of a monk and magician who called himself Trithemius, and contains codes and conjurations and various prayers which its author claimed could cause angels to act on behalf of those deploying them. My copy is not of the much corrupted edition that was published long after Trithemius's death, in 1676, but one of only five volumes printed in 1504, the year before he was summoned before Maximillian I and interrogated on matters of faith. Mr. Halliwell—or the man for whom he works—probably traced it through the records of the auction house where I purchased it some twenty years ago."

"Ever tried any of those spells out?" Miranda tried to sound casual, but her eyes were shining.

"Of course not. If you were in possession of a bomb, would you try to detonate it to see if it worked?"

"Course I would. And I wouldn't leave it in a house with an unlocked door neither."

"The house was protected by more than mere locks, as you well know, but I will admit that you have a valid point."

"He had a briefcase," Miranda said. "Donny Halliwell, I mean. The kind City gents take to work with them. My mate Wayne nicked one once, thinking he was on to a good thing, and all he found in it was a sandwich from Pret A Manger. Couldn't even sell the briefcase, 'cause he broke the locks getting it open."

"You saw Mr. Halliwell walk into the house."

Her gaze was bold and unflinching. She really did possess an admirable faculty for untruths. "He burned a piece of paper on the front step first. It went off like a firework, made a sort of greenish smoke. Then he walked in, and about two minutes later he walked out. Got in the car, and off he drove."

"He was, I presume, still carrying the briefcase."

"With your book inside it. So now we have to get it back before he does something bad with it."

"I have to get it back, Miranda. You have already done more than enough."

"No problem, Mr Carlyle. You got to do what you got to do."

She met my gaze boldly, and I saw the glint of triumph in her eyes. She believed that she had succeeded in fooling me, but it was not yet time to disabuse her.

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After Miranda left, I slept for a few hours, breakfasted in a café, and walked against the swelling tide of commuters to the Thames and followed the path beside it upriver, toward Chelsea. Public transport is so thickly infested with imps and other revenants that I am forced to walk everywhere, and these days even the streets are so crowded with remnants of moments of frustration and anger that at times it is like plunging head-first into the mephitic smuts and fumes of a factory chimney.

Ordinarily, I would have waited and watched before acting. I would have consulted various contacts. I would have made sure that I knew as much as possible about my enemy before making the first move. But this was no time for temperate contemplation. My house had been violated; one of my most precious possessions

had been stolen; my temper had been roused. And I feared that the stolen book would be put to immediate use—why else would Donny Halliwell's boss have resorted to such desperate measures to obtain it? I did make one stop along the way, however, to use (after spending a good five minutes clearing it of the residue of its previous occupants) one of the few public telephone kiosks that still accepted coins to call my old friend, Chief Superintendent Rawles. He had recently retired from the Metropolitan Police but told me that he could find out the answers to my questions easily enough.

"I will telephone you again, in an hour or so," I said, and hung up the receiver before he could ask any questions of his own.

I reached Chelsea just after midday, hot, footsore, and beginning to feel a pinching anxiety about the task ahead of me. I found refuge in a public house, bought a Ploughman's Lunch and a half pint of beer, and, after the usual chore of cleansing it, used the public telephone to call Rawles.

He told me what he had found out about Miranda, confirmed what she had told me about Donny Halliwell, gave me Rainer Sue's address, and asked if I was in trouble again.

"It is nothing serious," I said, regretting the lie.

"Call me if you need any real help," Rawles said. "And promise me that you'll tell me what this is all about when it's finished."

I said that I would, and meant it; Rawles was a kind and generous friend who had been a great help to me many times in the past. I left the pub and strolled through the neat, pretty streets of Chelsea to Cheyne Walk, with its ghosts and memories and heavy mantle of history. Here was the house where the young engineer who had shared my first adventure in this city had once lived with his father; here was the house where the irascible old painter, known to his neighbours only as either the Admiral, or "Puggy" Booth, had ended his days in hiding from his public. Here was the house of John Martyn, whose ability to glimpse a little of the city of the dead that surrounds and interpenetrates the city of the living had informed his apocalyptic paintings (his brother, who once had tried to burn down York Minster, had been driven insane by the same gift); and here the house where one memorable evening I once visited Hilaire Belloc in the company of Gilbert Chesterton.

The address Rawles had given me was at the eastern end of Cheyne Walk, in the middle of a row of old, red-brick houses shielded from the headlong roar of traffic along the Chelsea Embankment by a narrow public garden of shrubbery and grass. Expensive motor vehicles stood nose to tail at the kerb of the narrow road that ran between the houses and the park. There was a quiet, dignified air of prosperity, the smell of fresh paint.

I found a bench in the public garden and studied Rainer Sue's house through a gap in the shrubbery. There was no sign of the blood-red Mark 1 Jaguar. A huge wisteria

flopped pale green leaves and spikes of purple flowers over the black railings of the front garden. The curtains were closed at every window, as if in mourning, or as if those who ordinarily lived in it had picked up and moved elsewhere for the season, and I quickly realized that in one sense it really was uninhabited. Unlike all the other houses in this old, much-haunted street, it was quite without ghosts or any kind of revenant, and none came near it; not even the smallest batsqueak of an imp clung anywhere close. It was as quiet as a tomb set under a bell jar in the middle of a busy thoroughfare, so completely still that its silence vibrated in the ear like a gnat. Sealed deep in that silence, like a fly in amber, was a tiny, dense knot of impacted energies that would have escaped the attention of someone only a little less skilled than I.

The ghost of a sulky young housemaid who had drowned herself more than a century ago, after she had become pregnant from a dalliance with a coachman, loitered by the river wall on the far side of the Embankment. I called her over (she drifted across the busy road quite oblivious to the traffic), but she would not do my bidding, said that she'd do anything else for me, anything at all, but not that. I felt a sudden spark of exasperation at this unhappy remnant's simpering refusal and dismissed her—erased her entire, as easily as blowing out a candle, and allowed my anger to balloon, sucking up all the discarded emotions that blew about the street like scraps of litter. Prickly shards of anger; suffocating rags of distress; flecks of shock and fear bright as fragments of glass; slimy strands of disgust; even a few pure motes of joy, that most effervescent of emotions: I drew in them all. The baggy crowd whirled about me like a pocket thunderstorm, growing ever darker and denser. The leaves of the dusty young plane tree under which I sat began to tremble. On the Embankment road, drivers unconsciously tapped on their accelerators to speed past.

When I had called up every imp within reach, I threw the entire flock at the front door of the house, straight into the heart of its bubble of preternatural quiet. The house swallowed the thick, lively rope whole. For several minutes nothing happened. Traffic continued to chase itself along the Embankment. An aeroplane made a dull roar above the low grey clouds that sagged over the trees on the other side of the river. Then I felt a swelling pressure, and the ordinary fabric of the house—the red-brick walls, the wrought-iron balcony, the slate roof—was overlaid by a filmy black wave, like a photograph blistering in the heat of a fire. Things seethed within it, shadows on shadows, imps of every kind twisting around each other like a myriad of snakes eating each other's tails, many more than I had poured into the house, released from the trap buried deep in its fabric and flying outward in every direction. I dissolved hundreds of imps as the expanding wavefront boiled over me, but it was like trying to flick away every drop of rain that pelts you in a thunderstorm. I felt a moment of intense dislocation as several dozen survivors passed straight through me, and managed to save a few of them. The rest flew on, across the road, across the river. A white van broadsided by the impalpable storm swerved and smashed into an oncoming car; the car spun around and its rear slammed into a tree. Broken branches collapsed onto it, fell into the road. A bus braked with an explosive sneeze; horns sounded along the two lanes of stalled traffic.

I had no doubt that the trap had been designed to collapse had I entered the house unprepared; and if I had been caught in the midst of thousands of suddenly freed imps, I would have been stripped bare by their frenzy of anger and fear and delirium and disgust. It would have taken me days to recover, and meanwhile I would have been quite helpless. As it was, there would be a sudden and inexplicable increase in violence in this part of the city tonight—arguments, fights, perhaps even murders—but I had escaped the worst of the trap.

Traffic was building up on either side of the road accident. The driver of the car which had smashed into the tree was climbing out of his wrecked vehicle. Two men wrenched back the door of the van; the driver slumped into their arms. The front door of Rainer Sue's house opened and a woman in a nylon housecoat walked down the steps, unlocked the gate, sat down at the kerb, and put her head between her knees and was sick. I ducked through the shrubbery and walked straight past her, into the house.

A vacuum cleaner moaned in the hallway, whispering into silence when I pulled out its plug. I called out Rainer Sue's name, called out Donny Halliwell's, and when there was no reply walked into the living room. Its pale yellow walls were hung with framed gold records and intricate paintings by Australian aboriginals that whispered of landscapes I would never know, dreams I would never have. There was a huge white couch facing a widescreen TV. There were vases of white lilies, vases of eucalyptus branches. There was a tall bookcase crammed with leather-bound volumes, mostly fake grimoires and incunabulae, although amongst the rubbish was a worm-eaten set of the three volumes of del Rio's *Disquisitionum Magicarum* and a rather fine copy of Casiano's *Summa Diabolica* in Moroccan leather. The raised wing of a grand piano gave back my reflection as I hurried past it, through open French windows and down a flight of steps into the garden. A gravel path ran between raised beds of white lavender, white roses, grey thistles, and tiger-striped grasses to a pergola grown over with an enormous, ancient grape vine that was perhaps as old as the house. Glassy bunches of grapes, transparent as teardrops, dangled amongst hand-shaped leaves. In one corner was a plywood construct not much bigger than a coffin stood on its end. I opened its door. It was lined with wards and layers of soil and tinfoil—it was a form of orgone box, although infinitely more sophisticated—and the man who squatted inside on a narrow bench seat blinked at me.

He was in his early forties, barechested and barefoot, wearing only white jeans and a deep tan, and possessed of a delicate, androgynous beauty. His face was unlined; his blond quiff artfully dishevelled. There were marks like little bee stings along the insides of his forearms, yet no imps of delirium clung to him. He smiled tremulously at me, his eyes clouded and vague, and said, "Do I know you?"

I had no doubt that this was the former pop star, Rainer Sue, and knew at once that he could have had nothing to do with the theft of my book, or the trap left for me in his house. "You must come with me at once," I said, and tugged at his arm when he

was slow to rise. I was fizzing with impatience and fear—I knew that the man who had set the trap would be nearby, eager to see if it had caught me.

Rainer Sue followed me compliantly and unquestioningly. When I asked him about Donny Halliwell, he shrugged.

"He is not here?"

Rainer Sue shrugged again. I was sure that he was drugged—those bee stings—but he had also been made safe, made docile. We were walking away from the house now, and for a moment his attention was caught by the flashing blue lights of the ambulance and the two police cars that had arrived at the scene of the accident on the Embankment.

"Someone got hurt," he said.

"It isn't as bad as it could have been. Apart from Mr. Halliwell, who else lives with you?"

Rainer Sue considered this. Thoughts rose to the surface of his face like trout in a still pool. "I have a guy who cooks for me and looks after the garden. And this woman comes in and cleans; she should be around, I guess. Wakes me up with her vacuum cleaner ..."

"I saw her. Where is Donny Halliwell? And where is your driver?"

"Donny drives me. Or we get a limo, and a driver comes with it."

I thought of the two people in the Jaguar. If Donny Halliwell had been the man who had confronted me—and I had only Miranda's word that it was, just as I had only Miranda's word that Donny Halliwell had broken into my house—then who was the driver? Someone who was skilled in the matter of the dead, that much was certain—someone who had made Donny Halliwell into his servant and had turned Rainer Sue into an amiable zombie, cleaned his house of revenants, and packed thousands of imps into the trap.

I said, "Does Mr. Halliwell have a friend? Someone who is perhaps staying with you?"

"He's my friend," Rainer Sue said simply.

"And who is he, this friend of yours?"

"We like the same things. Books—that's how we became friends." The pop star's attempt to look sly made him seem imbecilic. "We like the same books."

"Does he have a name, this friend of yours?"

"Cagliostro." Rainer Sue frowned when I laughed. "What's wrong? You know him?"

"I know of the man whose name your friend has assumed. How long has he been staying with you?"

Rainer Sue scratched at his bare chest while thoughts came and went under the surface of his face. At last he said, "A few days. A week, something like that. He's a very together guy, you know. He helped me. Helped me get rid of some very heavy psychic luggage. Made me feel a whole lot better, you know?"

"I'm sure he did." I felt a touch of nausea at the thought of what had been done to this poor foolish man, and asked, "Can you drive?"

"Sure. I love driving." His eyes lit up for a moment; then his face fell. "But Donny doesn't let me."

"I will let you. Do you have a motor car other than the Jaguar?"

"Sure."

"Then lead on, Mr. Sue," I said. "Take me to your car."

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It was cached in a lockup garage at the rear of a nearby mansion block: a Mini in Racing Green, with white leather seats and tinted windows. It took me fifteen minutes, trembling with concentration, to purge it of every imp and residue, and make certain that there were no hidden traps or surprises. All the while, Rainer Sue hugged himself and hopped from one bare foot to the other like an incontinent child, murmuring *boy oh boy, boy oh boy*.

It turned out that he was not a bad driver, and in any case it was not possible for him to drive at any great speed in the traffic-clogged streets, but I kept my eyes closed most of the way, opening them only to give directions or to try to work out where we were on the four or five occasions when he lost his bearings. He grinned from ear to ear, beating brief rhythms on the steering wheel and humming to himself as the little car lurched and scuttled and crept along. At least he had been left with the capacity for happiness; not out of charity on the part of the man who called himself Cagliostro, but because it made him more amenable to instruction.

It took more than two hours to drive across the city to the second address Rawles had given me: the mean block of council flats where Miranda lived. I left Rainer Sue in the Mini—I was fairly certain that he would not drive off, and was also fairly certain that he would fail to remember to sound the horn if he saw Donny Halliwell or the red Jaguar—and climbed three flights of a concrete stairway. The usual graffiti, the usual stink of urine, the usual litter of discarded needles and soft drink cans and

polystyrene clamshells, the usual little infestations.

Like Rainer Sue's house, Miranda's flat possessed an eerie, empty quiet. There were no wards or traps; apart from a single nest of imps, it had been swept clean. No one came to the door when I knocked. The window beside it was blanked with a lace curtain; inside, the ledge was thick with the husks of flies, which have the same mindless attraction to certain residues as to excrement, rotten food, and corpses.

The door was armed with three cheap locks that took only a couple of minutes to pick. It was hot inside, the air thickened by a stale, human smell. The kitchen counter was piled with fast food containers, pizza boxes, cartons of a generic protein powder, and crushed soft drink cans; the living room was stacked with loot. Small televisions and portable stereos; video and DVD players; microwaves and laptop computers; dozens of boxes of trainers. The sofa glittered with drifts of CDs and DVDs. A shoe box heavy with loose jewellery and wristwatches sat on top of a pile of neatly folded tracksuits. I imagined Miranda waiting outside a house while a tame imp inspected every room; I imagined her interrogating imps or even ghosts cast off by householders, discovering where spare sets of keys were cached, the codes for alarms.

I steeled myself for the worst, and went toward the place where the little nest of imps was lodged. The door to one bedroom—Miranda's—was sealed with a padlocked metal bar. The door to the other stood open. It was very dark inside, and smelt worse than the stairwell. Someone lay on the bed, breathing with a steady rasping snore.

I assumed that it was Miranda's mother, but when I cracked the curtains I saw that it was a man, very thin, heavily bearded, and naked apart from a pair of urine-sodden underpants. Imps of delirium clustered thickly around his head. They were like fat, pale grubs, satiated, sluggish, and as vulnerable as newborn kittens, but it cost me much to disperse them. I had to sit on the edge of the bed afterward, feeling my blood moving through me, slow and thick. The man was as pale as paper, all bone and sinew, and he stank like a corpse. His hair tangled in greasy ropes around his face. His skin was tight on the bones of his skull. His shallow breath rasped in the black slot of his mouth. As I stared at him, he made a small movement, averting his face as if in shame.

I rinsed grey fur from a coffee mug in the kitchen, fed the man sips of water with my wetted handkerchief. I asked him gently how long he had been held like this. He could not or would not speak, but when I told him the date, tears leaked from his sunken eyes. The insides of his forearms were raw with track marks. Disposable hypodermic syringes in clear plastic envelopes and disposable needles in brown plastic sleeves lay on the bedside table. There was a cellophane wrap of gritty white powder, a bent, blackened spoon, several disposable cigarette lighters, a baby's bottle. Miranda had kept this man prisoner a long time, quietening him with heroin and the attentions of the imps, feeding him on protein mix. I had a pretty good idea who he must be, and wondered what he had done to her (or what she thought he had

done to her) to deserve such a dreadful punishment.

I found a working mobile phone on the kitchen table and used it to make two calls, then made inquiries amongst the neighbouring flats, explaining that I was a private investigator trying to trace Miranda on behalf of lawyers who were administering a small bequest due to her. A garrulous old woman in a bright red wig said that she felt sorry for the girl—her mother had disappeared, and her father was a nasty piece of work. A no-nonsense black woman who stood in her doorway with a small girl embracing her knees and a delicious smell of baking wafting around her told me she thought that Miranda was living alone, confirmed that her father possessed the skull tattoo I had seen on the shoulder of the man on the bed, and said that she had not seen him for six months, good riddance as far as she was concerned. She leaned closer and whispered that I should be careful of his daughter, she was a duppy girl. "Spooky little creature. Give you a look like she want to try stop your heart, you know?"

I said that I did, and thanked her. As I descended the noisome stairs, I saw a familiar head of auburn hair climbing toward me: it was Liz, the girl Miranda had followed two nights ago. She fled when I called her name, unlocked the door of a flat and slid through it and slammed it in my face. I called through the letterbox, told her that I wanted to ask her about Miranda; she said that if I didn't go away she'd call the police. I reached out and combed away her fear. I told her that I knew now that I had been wrong about the other night and wanted to make amends. I said, "I will make sure that she does not trouble you again."

There was a long silence, and then Liz said, "She's mad, she is. Someone should do something about her."

"I intend to. Perhaps you can help me, young lady. Perhaps you can tell me about Miranda's father."

"Him? He's a right devil. Used to beat up her mother something awful, until she had enough and ran back to Ireland. Then he started on Miranda. He'd hit her with the telephone book, or his belt. Police would come round sometimes, but they didn't do anything. I used to feel sorry for her, but then her dad ran off, too, and she went funny. She changed."

Liz told me that Miranda had stopped going to school six months ago, that she had been hurting herself ever since her mother ran off.

"She said it was the only thing that made her feel real. But then she started trying to hurt other people."

Liz was crying on the other side of the door, half-suppressed sobs like hiccups.

I said, "When did you last see her father?"

"About the same time. Miranda said he went to look for her mother. She's been

living on her own ever since. The social people came snooping around once, but they left her alone. Everyone leaves her alone now. She scares them. Who are you, mister? Are you with the social, or the police?"

"I am trying to find out how I can help Miranda," I said. I was thinking of the man on the bed. I suspected that she had been punishing her father for something a good deal nastier than a few beatings.

"She follows people around," Liz whispered through the letterbox. "Like she followed me, the other night. She's jealous, I reckon. Doesn't like people who have ordinary lives. Someone should make her stop it, but everyone's frightened of her."

"Where does she spend her time, during the day?"

"I told you, she doesn't go to school any more. Got suspended, didn't she? She hangs around here, pops up when you don't expect her ..."

"If she said to you, 'I'll be at the usual place,' where would that be?"

"You know the pub in the market where they sell the antiques and stuff? She nicks stuff, and she sells some of it there. Doesn't care who knows it, either. Gets drunk on beer she pays this old wino to buy for her."

"Thank you, Elizabeth. You have been most helpful."

"She wants putting away somewhere. Somewhere where she can get better. Is that what you're going to do?"

"I am going to try to help her," I said.

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As Rainer Sue drove me away in his Mini, an ambulance twinkled past in the other direction, toward the block of flats. One of the calls I had made had been to the emergency services; the other had been to Miranda's mobile phone, in which I had cached an imp during my demonstration of my pickpocketing skills. It was a very small and very stupid imp, but after Miranda had spat a swear word into my silence and rung off, it had maintained the connection and recited the various conversations it had overheard. There had been several bits of business about the disposal of stolen property and the purchase of heroin, and there had been this:

UNKNOWN MAN: The trap has fired.

MIRANDA: I told you I'd get him to go there. So he's out of the picture, right?

UNKNOWN MAN: Unfortunately, he has escaped from the house. However, I imagine that he is seriously weakened, and I will deal with him later, when we have concluded our business.

MIRANDA: It doesn't change what we agreed about the book.

UNKNOWN MAN: It would be unwise to anger me, young woman.

MIRANDA: Well, *you* don't piss *me* off, either, or I might find someone else interested in what I took. (*A pause.*) You still there?

UNKNOWN MAN: We will meet as agreed.

MIRANDA: The usual place I meet everyone, out in the open, no tricks. I'll give you what you want, and you'll pay me what you promised.

UNKNOWN MAN: As agreed, yes.

MIRANDA: And you'll show me things.

UNKNOWN MAN: Of course. I am a man of honour.

I had Rainer Sue park a little way from Camden Passage and told him that he was free to go.

"Can't I stay? This is kind of exciting." He wriggled in his seat and looked at me with shining eyes, like a puppy eager to play.

I wrote the name and address of a psychologist on a slip of paper, a good man with an open mind who had sought my help once or twice, and folded it into the hand of the former pop star. "This man will help you, if you let him. Go home, Mr. Sue, and get on with the rest of your life. And if the man who calls himself Cagliostro comes back to your house, don't let him in," I said, and climbed out of the Mini and walked away, toward Camden Passage.

It was Thursday, the day that antique traders set up their stalls in the spaces amongst the small shops that line the lane. It was late in the afternoon and most of them were packing up now, wrapping unsold goods in newspaper, carrying laden cardboard boxes and plastic bakery trays to Volvos and people carriers double-parked on Essex Road. I saw Miranda on the wall of the terrace outside the public house in the middle of the market, swigging from a bottle of beer, idly kicking her legs while she talked with one of the blanket traders who make their pitches on the pavement outside. Her baseball cap was set on her head. A briefcase was set on the wall beside her.

I waited and watched for more than an hour. At last, she went inside the public house to use its lavatory. I caught her in the corridor when she came out, and pushed her into a cupboard full of cleaning materials. At first she denied that she had anything to do with the theft of my book, but after I drew my blade and put it to her

throat and convinced her that I meant business, she said that Donny Halliwell had made her do it.

"Mr. Halliwell is merely a stooge for the man who wants my copy of the *Stenographia*. The man with whom you conversed on your mobile phone a few hours ago. The man who calls himself Cagliostro. Who is he, Miranda?"

The girl tried to twist away, stilled when I pricked her throat with the point of my blade. We were jammed together in the close dark of the cupboard. She smelt of fear and alcohol; fear oozed out of her in a discrete package that clung inside her hood, and she tried and failed to use this newborn imp against me.

"It will not obey you as long as I am here," I said. "Did you really think you were more powerful than me?"

"I fooled you, didn't I?"

"For a little while, but no longer. When did you start to work for Cagliostro?"

"I don't work for anyone."

"You made a compact with him. You told him that you had found out where I lived, and you agreed to steal my book for him."

"I told you, I don't work for anyone."

Keeping the point of my blade at her throat, I pulled the briefcase from her grasp. "What would I find, Miranda, if I looked in here?"

She looked at me, sullen and defiant and scared.

"The man who wants the book you stole could not find my house, attempted to lure me into an insultingly obvious trap, and hides behind a foolish pseudonym. If you had the benefit of a proper education, Miranda, you would know that the Count of Cagliostro was a charlatan who died more than two hundred years ago, a peddler of quack remedies whose chief fame is that he was immortalized in the writings of Alexander Dumas. I doubt that I have anything to fear from the man who has taken his name, and I also doubt that he has anything to teach you."

"He showed me how to break your wards, and he said he'd show me other stuff, too. He's a powerful man," Miranda said sullenly, "so you better watch out."

"We will soon see how powerful he is—you arranged to meet him here, did you not, in your 'usual place'? I warned you about the affinity of imps for telephones. One inhabits your mobile phone, and has been listening to your conversations. You arranged to meet Cagliostro. Very well. We will wait for him together."

"He'll hurt you."

"No, he won't. And I won't let him hurt you, either."

"I can look after myself."

"I know that you can," I said. "But the way you are going about it will only do you harm. I know about your father, Miranda. I know what he did to you, and I know what you did to him. I understand—"

She twisted in my grip again, started to shout bloody murder, the perennial cry of the London mob, and kicked at the door of the cupboard. I twisted the key and stood aside and let her run.

A large man in one of the green sweatshirts worn by the public house's staff stood at the top of the stairs, wanting to know what all the noise was about. I plucked up an imp and flung it at him and left him there, whimpering some nonsense about rats, and followed Miranda. I knew that she would go straight to Cagliostro. It was time to meet him.

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The red Jaguar was waiting at the end of Camden Passage. Donny Halliwell eased out of it like a cork from a champagne bottle.

I raised the briefcase, and told him that I would deal only with the man for whom he was working. The driver of the Jaguar said something; Donny Halliwell reached into the pocket of his crumpled jacket and showed me a small black pistol. His smile was a grimace, as if wires had pulled up the corners of his mouth. One of his front teeth was gold. "Get in the car," he said.

I climbed into the back. Miranda was hunched in the corner, small and scared. She looked at me, her lower lip caught between her teeth, looked away when I told her that everything would be all right.

"There is a sword in his cane," the man behind the steering wheel said. "Deal with it."

Donny Halliwell took my cane from me, unsheathed the blade, stuck it between two paving stones, and put a right angle in it. He left it quivering there like a broken Excalibur, and levered himself into the car, making the back seat unpleasantly crowded and enveloping me in a yeasty smell of old sweat. The driver put his arm on the back of the passenger seat and looked at me. I realised that I had seen him two nights ago, in the café, and knew that he must be the man who called himself Cagliostro.

"You can let the girl go," I said. "She has nothing to do with this."

"She tried to cheat me," Cagliostro said. His was the kind of clipped English accent

that had been the norm on BBC radio until about twenty years ago. With his square, handsome face and black polo-neck sweater worn under a black corduroy jacket, he looked like a philosophy professor who has written a best-selling book traducing the ideas of his colleagues. His black hair, almost certainly dyed, was cut very short, showing the white scalp beneath; his eyes were the pale blue of sunlight seen through snow, and unblinkingly intent. He looked older than me, but he was not.

Beside me, Miranda stirred and said, "I never cheated you. I was going to give you the book, but he found me, didn't he? He took it back."

"You should have given it to me straight away," Cagliostro said.

"We had a deal. You said you'd teach me stuff."

"And so I will," Cagliostro said. "Such wonders. What a pity that you and Mr. Carlyle will not survive them." He looked at Donny Halliwell and said, "Show me the book."

The big man took the briefcase from me and snapped its locks. Cagliostro touched the book with long white fingers, then told his servant to close the briefcase and set it on the front seat. He smiled at me and said, "You do not recognise me."

"We have met before?"

"In 1941," Cagliostro said, and put the car in gear and pulled out into the traffic, ignoring the outraged horn blast of a bus.

"Which side were you on?"

"You must ask?"

"I suppose not."

"I was a mere boy then. And because it took me some time to learn how to prolong my life, I have aged somewhat. You, however, look much as you did then. You even wear the same silly costume."

"It is not a costume," I said, remembering the young man who had given me a calm look of pure hatred as he stood between two military policemen in a room hazed with the smoke of the one-time code pads he had burnt while soldiers had fought a gun battle with his associates. I told him now, "You had some small talent in the matter of the dead. You believed it to be a form of magic when we first met, and I thought you foolishly deluded. If you still believe it, then I am afraid that my opinion has not changed."

"See how he talks," Miranda said to Cagliostro. The poor girl was still trying to win his favour. "He thinks he's more important than anyone. That's why I helped you."

"This man was an enemy agent in the Second World War," I told her. "A Nazi spy. He bound ghosts to important buildings. The ghosts acted as markers or beacons

for others of his kind, who rode in bombers."

"Sounds cool," Miranda said.

"It was very cool," Cagliostro said. He was a skilful and ruthless driver, riding hard on the rear of the car in front of the Jaguar, overtaking it on the inside at the big roundabout as he aimed the big car into Old Street. "Unfortunately, flattery will not undo the damage you have caused."

"He called himself Count Roemheld then," I said. "It was no more his real name than Cagliostro."

"Names are powerful things, Mr. Carlyle," Cagliostro said. "I do not give up mine lightly."

"I did everything you asked," Miranda said. "I got him to go to Rainer Sue's house."

"Yet Mr. Carlyle escaped the trap. I wonder, young lady, if it was because you told him about it."

"I never!"

"I escaped," I said, "because your trap was so very crude. I defeated you once, and I will do so again."

But despite my brave words and the voluptuous feeling of calm that had possessed me ever since I had committed myself to this confrontation, I was not certain that either I or Miranda would survive it. I did not know how much power Cagliostro had gained since we had last met, and I had not counted on Donny Halliwell being armed. Miranda had been right. I was no longer wise to the ways of the streets. I did not assume that English criminals would carry pistols as casually as Wild West cowboys.

The Jaguar sped under the railway bridge where I had been stopped two nights before and turned sharply onto Kingsland Road. A pedestrian levitated himself out of the way. We drove past the Geffrye Museum. We drove past the new mosque. The gold cap of its tower shone in the late afternoon sunlight. Cagliostro looked at me in the rearview mirror and said, "Perhaps you are wondering why I need the book."

"As a matter of fact, I am wondering why you believe that you need me. You went to a great deal of trouble with your silly little trap, and you did not ask your creature to kill me just now, after you took possession of the book."

"Times are changing, Mr. Carlyle. We are at the end of one age and the beginning of another. It is time to choose sides. Those like you, who attempt to remain neutral, who pretend that they are aloof from the world, will be the first casualties. Do you not think that poetic justice?"

"I see no justice here, only the tired cliché of an old, defeated Nazi attempting revenge on his former nemesis."

"If I had wanted revenge, Mr. Carlyle, I would have found you more than fifty years ago. This is no more than a happy coincidence. I discovered that you had something I wanted, and when you would not accept my very reasonable offer, I was forced to take it."

"I believe it was Miranda who stole the book. You were not able to find my house, although you tried several times to follow me home."

"A foolish piece of deception, nothing more."

"A deception you were unable to see through, although Miranda managed it well enough. Of the three of us, who has the most of what you call 'power'?"

"I broke your wards. I laid the trap."

"Which did not quite catch me. You have the book, and you have me. Why not let the girl go? She has no part in this foolishness."

"I can look after myself," Miranda said.

"I wish it was true," I told her.

We drove through Hackney, drove beneath the flyovers of the motorway junction beyond Victoria Park to an industrial estate named after Shakespeare's gloomy, haunted prince. Donny Halliwell heaved out of the Jaguar and unlocked the gate.

"The man in charge of the security of this place is one of Mr. Halliwell's associates," Cagliostro said. "Remarkably easy to bribe. We will not be disturbed."

He drove past long low brick sheds housing businesses that mostly had something to do with the motor trade and stopped the Jaguar beside a fence that, sagging in front of a strip of weeds and straggling elder trees, ran along the boundary of the industrial estate, at the edge of the junction with the Hereford Union Canal and the navigational cut of the River Lea. Menaced by Donny Halliwell's gun, Miranda and I scrambled through the narrow belt of scrub to the towpath.

"Christ's cross was made from elder wood," Cagliostro said, as he followed us.

"And Judas hanged himself from an elder tree. A nice symmetry, don't you think?"

"More likely he hanged himself from a fig tree," I said, "since fig trees are native to his country and elder trees are not. Still, if you believe in that kind of thing, elder wood is said to be a protection from witchcraft. I find the idea encouraging."

The air was hot and close, thick with the smell of open water and fecund vegetation. To the west, the low clouds were breaking up, and the sun burned in the middle of a ragged patch of blue sky. On the dual carriageway that was elevated beyond a snagged sprawl of roofs, fugitive shards of sunlight gleamed on the roofs of

speeding cars and trucks. Cagliostro, holding the briefcase in one hand, turned a full circle, taking in the view of the backs of industrial buildings and brick walls on the other side of the canal. It was one of those mournful, scruffy places that belong to no one except the dead, but there were no revenants there—not so much as the smallest imp.

"A quiet place," he said. "I have made sure that we will not be disturbed, too. Any walkers or cyclists will discover that they have pressing need to turn back if they approach too closely."

He set the briefcase between his feet, reached inside his jacket, lifted out a white mouse by its naked tail, and tossed it to the ground. It ran off along the towpath, cheeping like a sparrow. He smiled when he saw my dismay and said, "I believe you have already met the entity my little sacrifice will summon. Shoot him."

Donny Halliwell stirred like a man jerked out of sleep, raised his little pistol, and fired. The bullet punched me in my left thigh. It passed straight through the meat without hitting bone, but even so I felt as if I had been struck with a red-hot poker. I grabbed the spot reflexively, lost my balance, and fell on my backside amongst dry weeds.

"You should have sold me the book," Cagliostro said. "I made you an excellent offer, and I would have honoured it. I even had another sacrifice marked out for this business. But you were too stubborn, Mr. Carlyle, and it has brought you to this."

"So that was why you were at the café," I said. It was a small consolation that I had saved its kindly owner.

"But instead you walked in, with the girl. You were trying to help her, but later that night she betrayed you and made a bargain with me. And now I have the book, and I have you, and I have her. Miranda, I will make good my promise to teach you something useful. Find four branches of elder wood, each about as thick as your thumb. Break them off and use your knife, the one you think I do not know about, to sharpen the broken ends into points."

"What for?"

"Because I tell you to."

They stared at each other. Miranda was searching for any revenant she could use against him, but apart for something with a cold remorseless hunger that was flowing toward us from the west, none were within reach.

"He wishes to stake me out," I told Miranda. "As a sacrifice to the thing that has taken up residence in this stretch of water. The thing that took your pet two nights ago. Can you feel it draw near?"

"Very good, Mr. Carlyle," Cagliostro said.

"You hope to make it more powerful and then bind it with incantations from the *Stenographia*. I should warn you that it will not work."

"The book has puissance."

"It has nothing of the kind."

"I believe your parents would disagree."

"They are in no position to disagree."

They had been dead for more than a hundred and seventy years, but it still hurt me to speak about them to a stranger.

"You will soon be at the same disadvantage. Four pieces of wood, young woman. Do it now, or Mr. Halliwell will shoot you dead and I'll feed your ghost to my pet."

Miranda looked at him from beneath the bill of her baseball cap. She was slight and so very young, but was stiffened by a core of irreducible defiance. "I know you're gonna to do that anyway," she said, "so don't expect me to do your work for you."

Cagliostro shrugged and told Donny Halliwell to deal with her. As the big man stepped toward Miranda, I used the connection I still had with the imp in her mobile phone and made the little machine ring. Cagliostro pinched the imp out, as I knew he would, and I used the momentary distraction to loose the imps I had saved from the trap at Rainer Sue's house. I had pinched them as small as a full stop and swallowed them. Now I coughed them up and threw them as hard as I could.

Not at Cagliostro—he would have dismissed them in an instant—but at Donny Halliwell.

They slammed into the big man and clung, covering him with crackling sparks of panic and disgust that burnt away the calm of his trance in an instant. His face cleared, and he turned to Cagliostro and raised the little black pistol and shot him, shot him again as he pitched forward, blood all over his face. As the two gunshots echoed off the brick wall on the other side of the canal, Cagliostro's prone body blurred, like a double-exposed photographic image, but even as the ghost, shocked from him by the violent moment of his death, began to get to its feet, a smooth white snake whipped up from the canal and opened its jaws wide and snapped it down. Miranda screamed, and something as massive and fast as an express train blasted over my head and smashed into the ancient revenant. It blew apart like a snowman hit square by a howitzer round. For an instant, a thousand fragments skittered away in every direction across the calm black water of the canal, and then they smoked into the air and were gone.

Miranda had fallen to her knees. The red blood that ran from her nose was shockingly bright against her white skin. She dabbed at it with the back of her hand, saw me looking at her, and said, "It took him. I saw it. I saw it eat his soul."

"It took the ghost he created at the moment of dying. If there are such things as souls, I have never seen one."

Donny Halliwell said, "I don't know what you two are talking about. I don't want to know. Just tell me he was going to kill you."

"Something of the sort," I said. My leg was hurting quite badly now, a swelling, bone-deep ache. My trouser leg was soaked with blood. My shoe was filled with blood.

Donny Halliwell stuck the pistol in his jacket pocket. His hand was shaking so badly it took him three tries. "He made me shoot you," he said.

"I know."

"It wasn't my idea. None of this was my idea. I don't even know where I am. Last thing I remember properly is opening the door to him. And then everything sort of fell away. It was like I was in the back of my head, watching things happen on a very small TV."

"He hypnotized you," I said.

"Where's Rainer?"

"He helped me, and then I sent him home."

"He was so excited when this bloke wrote to him—something about those stupid books of his. He trusts people too much. Are you sure he's okay? At some point I think I gave him some kind of drug."

"I gave him the name of a man who can help him," I said.

"I better go and see how he is," Donny Halliwell said. "He isn't too good on his own."

"Of course," I said, and was relieved when the big man crashed away through the belt of scrubby trees.

Miranda shuddered once, all over, and said, "I thought he was going to finish us off."

"So did I. Is your mobile phone working?"

"Course. I'll call an ambulance."

"That won't be necessary," I said, and gave her the telephone number of a sympathetic doctor. After she had made the call, I told her to open the briefcase and bring me my book.

She could not quite meet my gaze when she handed it to me. It was a heavy quarto volume bound in the hide of an unborn calf tanned by age to an uneven buttery

colour, its pages made of good-quality linen paper. I ran my fingers over the intricate knot embossed in the leather under the stamped gold title. "After my parents died, it was important to me to recreate their library. This was the last volume I needed, the rarest and the most expensive. You would not believe me if I told you how much I paid for it," I said, and threw it into the canal.

It made quite a splash.

"You're mad," Miranda said.

"I should have done it some time ago. Our dead friend was right about one thing: times have changed. And it is time to let go of the past. Now, would you be so kind as to cut a branch from one of those elders?"

"What are you going to do? Stake him through the heart?"

"Cagliostro was no vampire. I do not want Dr. Barrow to find us here, with the body. If I am to hobble to the road, I will need a crutch."

"Then what?"

"Dr. Barrow will take me to his home, he will treat my wound, and I will make up a story for the police."

"I mean, what about me?"

"The police will want to talk to you about your father, but I can vouch for you."

"He hurt me," she said, plainly and simply. "After Mum left, he came into my room every night and hurt me."

"And when you could, you hurt him in turn. I understand. But by destroying him in that way, by dedicating your life to his punishment, you would also have destroyed yourself."

"I wanted to kill him," she said. "But I didn't want his ghost haunting me. I can see them sometimes, ghosts, but I can't do anything with them."

"You did quite well with Cagliostro's pet."

"They'll put me away, won't they?"

"I have never before taken on an apprentice, Miranda. I have lived a solitary life ever since I moved to London. Last night, you said that I had no real friends. That I did not let anyone get close to me. And you were right. But times have changed, much more than I believed when I first began to walk the streets at night. You have a powerful gift, and I can teach you how to use it, if you will let me. But I should warn you that it will not be an easy path."

"Teach me."

She said it with a sudden, raw, naked passion, and in that moment I had my first glimpse of the real Miranda, the human being who hid behind the sullen, wary mask of a child brought up on the stones.

"Teach me," she said. "Teach me stuff."

The End