

# TIME HUNTER



CHILD OF TIME  
GEORGE MANN &  
DAVID J HOWE

# Contents

Title Page	4
Publisher Information	5
Acknowledgements	6
The Time Hunter	7
<b><i>The Screaming Bones</i></b>	<b>8</b>
1	8
2	11
3	15
4	19
5	22
<b><i>The Wreckage of Time</i></b>	<b>28</b>
1	28
2	33
3	38
4	46
5	50
6	54
7	59
8	62
9	64
10	68
<b><i>The Children of Venice</i></b>	<b>76</b>
1	76
2	90
3	96
4	107
5	120

<b><i>The Child of Time</i></b>	<b>133</b>
1	133
2	139
3	144
4	151
<b><i>The End – One</i></b>	<b>158</b>
<b><i>The End – Two</i></b>	<b>161</b>
<b><i>The Beginning – Night and Fog</i></b>	<b>166</b>
About The Authors	170
The Time Hunter Series	171

**TIME HUNTER**

**CHILD OF TIME**

by  
**George Mann and David J Howe**

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## The Time Hunter

Honoré Lechasseur and Emily Blandish... Honoré is a black American ex-GI, now living in London, 1951, working sometimes as a private detective, sometimes as a 'fixer,' or spiv. Now life has a new purpose for him as he has discovered that he is a time sensitive. In theory, this attribute, as well as affording him a low-level perception of the fabric of time itself, gives him the ability to sense the whole timeline of any person with whom he comes into contact. He just has to learn how to master it.

Emily is a strange young woman whom Honoré has taken under his wing. She is suffering from amnesia, and so knows little of her own background. She comes from a time in Earth's far future, one of a small minority of people known as time channellers, who have developed the ability to make jumps through time using mental powers so highly evolved that they could almost be mistaken for magic. They cannot do this alone, however. In order to achieve a time-jump, a time channeller must connect with a time sensitive.

When Honoré and Emily connect, the adventures begin.

# The Screaming Bones

London 1951

## 1

It was a typical East End morning; it was raining.

The streets were slick with the downpour, the drizzly veil obscuring Harris's vision as he dashed through the narrow lanes, dodging puddles where the water had gathered between the uneven paving stones. Paving stones that had been splintered by the crashing debris from the Luftwaffe detonations, from a time – not that long ago – when the sky had rained more than just water, sleet and snow. Harris still found himself slamming awake from the vivid night terrors that had plagued him since the end of the War, sitting bolt-upright in bed, drenched in sweat, sheets clenched in whitened fists, convinced that blood and bone and human remains were showering him from the sky again, like they did that day on Euston Road when he'd been caught out in the open during a German bombing raid.

The Blitz seemed like a lifetime ago now, but the patter of the rain still reminded him of that day, and he quickened his pace, keen to get away from it. He darted across the marketplace, his open raincoat whipping up around him in the driving wind, leaving trails of brown cloth billowing in his wake.

Around the marketplace they were still rebuilding. The tidy façades of houses and shop fronts hid wreckage and devastation like a shiny veneer, glossing over the bruised interiors and shattered sub-frames of the former homes, burying the dead in silent, unmoving cairns. That was the reason for his early morning rush through the rain; he'd been called to the scene of a renovation where some workers had uncovered



a corpse.

Rounding a bend, his newspaper clutched over his head to ward off the worst of the downpour, he could easily make out the source of the disturbance. A large group of onlookers had congregated in a circle opposite a battered sign that swung in the wind: SPITALFIELDS MARKET.

They were chattering amongst themselves on the street corner where the builders had obviously lifted the body from the wreckage. Momentary eruptions of light, like the flashing of lightning in the rainstorm, suggested the press had already arrived at the scene and were busy sensationalising the find with lurid photographs of the body and other, more dramatic embellishments.

As he approached the throng of people he flashed his badge, and the crowd parted to let him through. Before taking a look at the body itself, which a quick glance had already told him was old – practically skeletal – he sought out one of the constables and assigned him to keeping the photographers at bay. No point letting them make a mountain out of a molehill; although, he supposed, it was probably too late for that now. Cursing the rain for making him late, he glanced around, acknowledging his sergeant with a nod of his head and casting a tired eye over the faces of the three workmen, who were still standing around in the rain, anxious and uncomfortable with all the attention. Then, after motioning to the crowd to give him some more room, he crouched down beside the body to take a better look, still holding his newspaper high over his head to stave off the spray.

His initial thought had been correct. The body was indeed almost skeletal; presumably, like so many others they'd found in recent times whilst cracking open the shells of imploded homes, it had been broken and defaced by the War. He felt his spirits crashing.

The upper torso of the skeleton was partially covered in a black, gossamer-like material that he didn't recognise. It was obviously some article of clothing, and looking closer he could see the stitching and cut that implied that this was the body of a woman. The body was lying on

its side, having been lifted out of the building on a large white dustsheet by the three workmen.

Harris pulled his handkerchief from his coat pocket and shook it out, then used it to gently turn the head towards him.

‘Oh God...’

Startled, he almost let it go again. The skeletal face of the victim stared blankly back at him from empty sockets. He rolled more of the skeleton over onto its back, the limbs clattering as the arms came away from the ribcage. The rest of the body was the same. Although the bones were pitted and dirty with age and exposure, it was obvious to Harris that they themselves had actually been defaced. Indeed, judging by the way they were marked – by what Harris presumed could only have been a knife or other cutting instrument – it seemed to him that they had been precisely and deliberately *etched*. And that meant it had happened *before* the building had collapsed in the bombing raids. His hopes of an easy day were quickly disappearing, washing away in the downpour.

Harris studied the bizarre runes that covered every inch of the skeleton. In all his life, he’d never seen anything like them. They weren’t Egyptian and they certainly weren’t Greek; he’d studied those at university. No, these probably had some occult significance, carved by some insane bastard whose hobby of sacrificing chickens had got out of hand. He’d heard of something similar recently: a group in France who’d taken to cutting symbols into their victim’s chests, little circles with horns, representing the Devil or some other such supernatural monster. He shook his head, seeking patience or, perhaps, strength.

He became aware of the noise all around him, the inquisitive heckling of the crowd, the constant patter of the rain. He remained still for a moment, shivering in the cold, and then he rose steadily to his feet and gestured towards one of the constables.

‘Clear these people away, officer. This is now the scene of a murder investigation.’

Some days it was like the fog wouldn't lift, and all Honoré wanted to do was to curl up on the bed and sleep, to hide away from the world and all its complications, its veneer of normality and respectability; to slide comfortably back into the ignorance of his old life, before the Albino, the Fendahl, Abraxas, the cabinet of light and... Emily. Other days he would sit for hours in his small room, listening to the noises in his head and wondering about the ghosts of the past and the spectres of the future. Wondering if he'd made the right decision to give it all up.

Today, he decided, was one of the former. He lay still for a moment on his bunk and gathered his thoughts. He knew Emily wanted to see him; Mrs Bag-O-Bones, his landlady, had slid a note under the door the previous day, written in her neat, antiquated copperplate, subtly chastising him for hiding away in his room and refusing to see his visitors. She probably thought he was sulking, and he knew her intentions were sound, but he needed time to regroup, to decide what to do next. For a while, he'd even considered leaving London, returning on the slow boat to New Orleans to start his life over again, leaving all the trouble behind. But deep down he knew that London had not given itself up to him yet; that there were still ghosts that needed exorcising.

He decided to get up and wash, and then head out for a walk. He hoped the air would help lift his mood.

The sky was heavy with rain and storm clouds as Honoré made his way along Whitechapel Road, looking for a newsagent's from which to buy his morning paper. It had started raining the day before and hadn't yet stopped, and the gutters and drains were spluttering with accumulated water and dirt. The rain reminded Honoré of home, of New Orleans in the fall, the fat raindrops stirring patterns on the bayou, the leafy smell of damp earth that somehow came to him every time he thought of his childhood. Here, though, the rain was a constant distraction, showering

over the brim of his hat and soaking through the creases in his leather coat, penetrating, insidious. To Honoré, it was like a portent, a warning, a direction from above, even – telling him to move on, to get out of this place and do something new. Or, at the very least, to stop standing still and letting the world rush by. He'd had a peculiar sense, just the day before, of feeling rooted to the spot, gravity bearing down on him as reality spooled away like a spoiled reel of film. He couldn't place the feeling, but it was as if the world had suddenly skipped a beat, dislocating him briefly from reality. Like he was being pulled towards something familiar. He shook his head. Perhaps Emily's paranoia had rubbed off on him more than he'd thought. He pulled his collar up against the patter of the rain, the water cold against the nape of his neck, and ducked into the doorway of a small store to fetch the morning news.

Back at his lodgings an hour later, he shook out his hat and coat and clambered noisily up the stairs, trying to keep the dripping garments from spoiling the print on his copy of *The Times*. Down the hall, he could hear the screeching whistle of Mrs Bag-O-Bones' kettle and hoped that she'd invite him to join her for a cup of tea. Later he needed to head over to Hammersmith to meet with some clients – a particularly nasty case involving a missing teenage girl – but for now he wanted to put that out of mind. It was Saturday morning, after all, and with any luck the weather would break before he needed to venture across town. He clicked the latch on the door to his room, pushing the door open with the edge of his boot. Ducking inside, he dropped his paper on the small table beneath the window, then hung his damp jacket on the back of the door, shrugging his shoulders when he noticed the pool of water spreading out quickly beneath it. He flung his hat nonchalantly on the bed.

The rain was still teeming down outside, rattling the old Georgian sash window in its frame as it pounded against the glass. He lowered himself into a chair, flipped his slightly-damp newspaper open in front

of him and scanned the headlines. One column in particular caught his attention immediately.

## **WOMAN'S BODY FOUND IN WRECKAGE**

The body of a woman was found yesterday in the wreckage of a building near Spitalfields Market when workmen clearing debris entered the building around 6am. The woman, thought to be between 20 and 30 years of age, is said to have been badly mutilated, with a series of ritualistic markings carved into her near-skeletal remains. Inspector John Harris of Scotland Yard attended the scene, where he declared a murder investigation to be underway. It is thought at this time, however, that the body may already be nearly two years old and that any useful evidence may have been destroyed when the derelict house collapsed in 1949 due to damage sustained years earlier during the Blitz. The body was moved to a nearby mortuary for post-mortem

Honoré rocked back in his chair and rubbed a hand thoughtfully through his neatly trimmed beard. He scanned the story again, looking for any

details he might have missed the first time. It was probably just another murder – a gruesome murder, admittedly – but something about it made him feel uneasy. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it may have had something to do with the reference to the 'ritualistic markings' that the killer had left on the body, or the location near Spitalfields Market. But, more than that, something about the whole scenario made him think of Emily.

He had not really had a conversation with her for weeks, not since their last, gut-wrenching encounter with their parallel world alter-egos and their decision, taken together, to stop meddling in other people's affairs – or, more accurately, to stop interfering with the course of time. What contact they had endured had been polite and non-committal, so very unlike the relationship they had fostered over the course of the previous year; perhaps the most open and honest friendship Honoré had ever known. Consequently, it chewed away at him from inside, often leaving him feeling despondent and unable to relax. Not only that, but he was sure that Emily was reaching a new level of frustration with her amnesia, and he feared how it might impact on her health if she, too, didn't make herself busy with something soon. They needed a distraction. He wondered for a moment if this murder investigation could be it. Then, just as soon as he'd had the idea, he tossed it away again. He had enough to keep him busy without worrying about police work too; especially two-year-old cases that lacked any leads.

He flicked through the newspaper, quietly absorbing the rest of the news, but unable to concentrate properly, his mind running in circles around him. He kept coming back to the story of the woman, visualising the body, with gruesome runes etched into her bones like words on a page, telling her story. Something about the very thought of it disturbed him right to his core, and if nothing else, he'd learned to trust his gut.

A few minutes later, he gathered up his still-dripping coat and hat and, leaving the newspaper to silently declare its news to the empty room, set out across town early, for once grateful for the distraction of the rain.

Emily Blandish was woken by the sound of knuckles rapping on hard wood.

She jumped out of bed, startled, her hair a fuzz of unkempt strands, her hands moving automatically to cover her modesty. The knocking grew more insistent, and she shuffled down the hallway towards the door, still dazed with the residue of sleep. Glancing down to check she was wearing her pyjamas, she cautiously opened the door.

‘Hello?’

The passage outside was silent, empty.

‘Hello?’

She clicked the door shut again and paced back into her bedroom, running her fingers through her hair. She came to an abrupt halt when she heard the rapping start up once more.

‘Look, if this is just another prank...’ She stopped herself short and sighed, realising that the sound was just the high winds tapping a branch against her window. Relieved, she allowed herself to relax, flopping back into the comfort of her warm bed. She tried closing her eyes again, but the light was seeping in from the other room and, besides, she was awake now. She supposed she should get herself up to face another day.

Rolling back out of bed, she allowed herself to feel a little twinge of disappointment. Secretly, she’d hoped the person at the door would be Honoré. Indeed, she was sure that one day soon he’d bang on her door, desperate for her help, and together they’d head off on another adventure, even if, this time, it only involved helping him to find a missing cat or chase down an errant husband. In truth, though, she was prepared for the disappointment. Honoré had been avoiding her for weeks, and even for a while before that, the time they had spent together had been simply perfunctory; two people who seemed to meet out of habit rather than purpose. She’d tried to talk to him – to talk to him properly – about the things they had seen, about whether or not

they had truly made the right decision to stop their travelling together through time, but he'd clammed up on her. Indeed, she now thought it was probably her persistence in pursuing those conversations that had driven him away.

Emily rubbed her lower back as she paced the room, deciding what to do with herself. She couldn't bear another day locked up in her small apartment, reading books and staring out of the window at the encroaching winter. Neither did she have anywhere else to go; Honoré was her only friend in London – in all the *world* – and she'd already spent the last couple of weeks haunting the libraries and museums of the city. No, it was time she took matters into her own hands. Today was the first day of December, and as good a time as any for a fresh start. Besides, if she didn't do something soon, she was going to go crazy. Lately she'd been carrying her amnesia around with her like a dead weight on her shoulders, and every possible avenue she'd explored had come to nothing. There seemed to be no resolution in sight, either; so far, the affliction had shown no signs of fading away naturally, and she'd convinced herself that the answer wasn't going to be found in medicine or science, but only in exploring her abilities, in meeting other travellers like herself and Honoré, trying to piece together the full story. Only Honoré could help her with that. And, she reasoned, only she could really help Honoré. They were like two lost souls, drifting amongst the living, and it was only when they were together that Emily felt truly whole.

It was time to make Honoré listen. He'd ignored her visits over the last couple of weeks; he wouldn't be able to ignore her today.

She walked to the bathroom and started running herself a bath. Within an hour she'd be on her way to his apartment, and this time she wasn't going to take no for an answer.

The wind and rain outside were bitterly cold as she stalked across town, her head held low, her small frame wrapped in a thick woollen coat that made her look like a little girl who was playing at dressing up in her



mother's clothes. Still, she felt invigorated by her resolve to find Honoré and challenge him on his reluctance to talk to her. She knew that she could make him see sense, given time; and at the moment, time was something she had in plentiful supply.

The city was bustling, the traders and shoppers all apparently immune to the fierce weather as they went about their business, preparing for the winter and the coming Christmas season. Fruit and vegetable stands had set up along the side of the road, and further ahead, Emily could see a man roasting chestnuts, his breath steaming in the frigid air.

It wasn't the life for her. She was convinced of that, if nothing else. She may not know her own history, but she knew her own mind, and a life full of nine-to-five and painted-on smiles would have driven her mad long ago. That was the root of her recent despondency, she realised, and probably the key to Honoré's too. How could someone who had seen the things they'd seen, who had visited other worlds and other times, who had the potential, deep down in the very fibre of their being, to make such a difference to other people's lives – how could someone who had tasted all that settle down to a normal life? The very thought of it was repellent to her. Not only that, but she was sure that the key to her amnesia – and thus to her very existence – lay somewhere out there, waiting for her and Honoré to uncover it, somewhere lost in time.

She dodged an oncoming child being chased down the street by another boy, shouting and laughing as they sped past. She smiled. Perhaps it wasn't all that bad. People carved their own lives out of what they had. But whatever the case, whatever the arguments against the idea, she was on her way to see Honoré now, and that would be the end of the matter, one way or another.

Half an hour later, she turned into the street where Honoré lived. She could see his bicycle, an old and slightly-rusty artefact from before the War, propped up against the railings outside Mrs Bag-O-Bones' house – which she supposed suggested that Honoré was at home. Of course, that wasn't a guarantee that he'd answer the door, but it was as good a starting point as any.

The wind and rain had continued to batter her as she made her way across town, and now she was wet through to her bones, her thick woollen coat sodden, her hair plastered across her face. Surely he'd at least take pity on her and let her in to get dry? She stood in the relative shelter of a tree for a moment, hugging herself to keep warm. The leaves had all fallen back in early November and she couldn't help feeling how dreary and barren the whole place looked. The weather was reflecting her mood. She steeled herself, fixing her resolve. And then, just as she was about to make a dash for it across the road and bang on the door, Honoré stepped out onto the street.

She darted back under the tree and held her breath, catching hold of a railing. He hadn't seen her, or at least he appeared not to have seen her; he simply tipped his hat against the driving rain, plunged his hands into his trench coat pockets and started off in the other direction at a brisk pace. Emily started forward again, thinking she could catch him up, but then stopped herself. He was probably just off to see a client, and to confront him now, in the middle of the street, would only ruin her chances of talking to him properly. She needed to get him alone somewhere where he wasn't going to be distracted. She thought for a moment about turning back for home, where she could dry herself out and curl up in front of the fire, but in the end, the temptation passed and curiosity got the better of her. And besides, she'd promised herself that things were going to come to a head today, one way or another.

Turning her collar up against the driving rain, she set off after Honoré, to follow him wherever his adventure would take him.

Spitalfields. Why did everything come back to Spitalfields? Again and again he found himself drawn here. It was as if the place had been touched in some way, as if it were a kind of nexus or centre point, a place where bifurcating timelines collided with one another and ruptured the flow of time, spitting out oddities and drawing time sensitives towards it like moths to a flame. At least, he realised, that had recently become his theory about what had happened to Emily – that she'd somehow gotten herself caught up in something she shouldn't have, an innocent bystander with a talent she didn't understand, whipped out of her own timeline and dumped unceremoniously here at Spitalfields, stranded, out-of-time and out-of-luck. It wasn't a bad theory, and it seemed to fit the bill; it explained why he couldn't see Emily's timesnake, it explained why he kept finding himself drawn back to this place – this haunted place – and it explained why, months ago, Barnaby Tewkes had chosen this place as a refuge against a malignant time entity.

And now this. An unexplained death in a collapsed building just off the square where Emily had first appeared from the mist, the victim's body covered in bizarre runes that had somehow been carved or etched onto the skeleton itself. It just didn't *feel* right. Honoré was the first to admit that murders – like most real police work – were well outside his remit. He had no real experience in dealing with killers, save for the monsters he'd encountered during his travels with Emily, be they human or alien; but something about the ritualistic nature of the death, and, more importantly, the *location* of the death, meant that he felt the need to investigate further. He'd decided not to tell Emily about it yet – he didn't want to get her hopes up and set her thinking that the mystery was somehow related to her amnesia – but all the same he knew his gut was telling him something different. This was something he couldn't ignore.

Honoré glanced around the marketplace, evaluating the lie of the land. It was busy, both from people streaming into the market itself and from the small crowd that had gathered around the site of the police investigation. To the left, the old church loomed over the whole scene, the Luftwaffe handprint still evident where the stone had been blackened by an explosion. There was something morose about the ruin, and he'd already seen enough of the place in this lifetime. Too many bad memories. He rubbed his hands together thoughtfully.

He knew he should be on his way over to Hammersmith by now, and was pained that he'd be letting down his clients – an emotional couple awaiting news of their missing daughter. But he also knew he had nothing to give them yet. The girl, Emmeline, had been missing for nearly a week, and the parents were convinced that something unspeakable had happened to her, but Honoré was unsure. He had his own suspicions that the father had been mistreating the girl, and that she had chosen to run away rather than confront the issue with her mother. He'd been tightening the net for a few days now, working through his network of contacts across the city to track her down, and was more convinced than ever that she was alive and well and living on the streets, moving around from place-to-place, looking for shelter. Still, he wanted to catch up with her himself before he talked to the parents. If he was right, and the nub of the problem lay at home, he didn't want to force her back into a situation where she might end up harmed, or worse.

He glanced at his watch. He'd go and visit his clients later. Right now, he needed to see if he could get to the bottom of the bizarre find at Spitalfields, if only to put his own mind at rest.

Pushing his way through the onlookers, he found himself up against a police barrier. The murder scene, if that's what it was, had been totally destroyed by the collapse of the building, and workmen were in the process of erecting screens to stop the people from getting too close. It was obvious from the strewn rubbish that the building had been ruined for some years. As with a lot of the bombed-out shells around the city,

it was only now that workmen and housing associations were starting to clear the debris to make things safe. Indeed, most of the shattered husks were being demolished altogether to make way for newer, more modern buildings, since the repair work was simply too big a job to be worthwhile. This was evidently the case here – half of the site had already been cleared, and it was obvious where the body had been uncovered from the way the workmen had avoided a particular area of rubble.

In truth, there was nothing much to see. The body had already been removed and taken to the morgue and the police presence at the scene was minimal. Honoré presumed they'd already decided that the site itself wasn't about to yield any secrets, so had retreated to their offices to await news of the autopsy. He backed out of the crowd, dodging the sea of umbrellas that had closed around him when he'd pushed his way forward. The constant drumming of the rain was wearing him down and he needed to get away from it for a while. But before he did, he had another call to make.

Leaving the crowd to ogle at the sole policeman who stood watch while the workmen raised the barriers around the crime scene, he moved away.

Silently, after a moment or two had passed, a shadow slipped out behind him and followed.

Honoré had visited the morgue before. In fact, he'd visited several morgues in his time, some of them immediately after the War, some of them more recently, usually during the course of his investigations. But this morgue in particular held gruesome memories for him. This was the place where he'd first seen Emily dead.<sup>1</sup>

The sight of her lying cold on a slab was burned brightly into his memory. At the time, he remembered, he'd felt so numb, so appalled by the sight of her pale, waxy body, that it had been all he could do to focus his rage on trying to find her killer. He'd buried his emotional reaction in the same place he'd buried his memories of the War: a little box in his psyche, the contents of which would probably drive him insane if he ever opened it. He'd chosen just to lock it down and keep moving, to hold off his grieving until such a time as he was able to catch the perpetrators and deal with them in the appropriate fashion. Still, as things had transpired, it hadn't proved necessary that time; the true Emily – his Emily – had turned up alive and well, and the nightmare scenario that had followed had eventually ended well, with both of them back home, safe and sound.

He knew now, though, that after seeing Emily dead, he'd developed a neurosis about letting her come to harm. He couldn't bear to see her hurt. This over-zealous protectiveness was half the reason he'd forced himself to stop travelling, to root himself to this time and place. If he couldn't travel, then neither could Emily, and that – in his opinion – was the best way to keep her safe. That and the fact that he had been so damn angry with himself when he'd met his alter-ego and seen what he could have become. The only way he could think to stop himself becoming that person was to stop travelling with Emily, to stop interfering with other people's lives and get on with living his own. Only, as he was finding, things were never that simple, and not only had he continued

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1 See *Time Hunter: The Winning Side*

to interfere with other people's lives – this time for money – but here he was standing outside the morgue, about to go in and try to talk his way into seeing the body of a murder victim who was covered in bizarre runes, for no other reason than it just didn't *feel* right. Life was full of complications.

Honoré glanced around out of habit, and then pushed the door to the morgue and stepped inside. Shaking himself off, and leaving a trail of water behind him, he approached the man on the desk.

'Good afternoon. I'm here about the body of the young woman who was pulled out of the wreckage down by Spitalfields yesterday.' He took off his hat and placed it down on the counter, causing water to pool on the lacquered desk.

The man on reception looked old enough to be retired, with wispy grey hair and a moustache that appeared to have adopted a yellow, mottled hue after many years of nicotine abuse. Honoré could see that he didn't have long left to live.

The man pushed his spectacles back up his nose, laid his pencil down neatly on the journal or log book, and looked up slowly.

'Don't I know you?'

Honoré smiled warmly. 'Indeed you do. My name is Honoré Lechasseur, and I've been to visit your establishment a number of times in the past. I carry out advisory work for the Metropolitan Police. Would you like to see my credentials?'

'No need, sir. The body is in room six. It's not a pretty sight, though; I'll warn you that much.'

Honoré breathed a sigh of relief. His 'credentials' consisted of a rolled up note in his pocket that he hoped a reluctant receptionist might accept as a bribe. The fact the man had recognised him was both a happy coincidence and a slightly alarming one. Nevertheless, he was in now, so, collecting his hat, he nodded at the man, thanked him, and made his way down the corridor to room six.

The room stank of disinfectant and blood. He clicked the door shut behind him and took a moment to look around. There was no-one else there; just the corpse stretched out before him on the slab – looking like nothing so much as a sacrifice on a large, white dais, offered up to the gods to atone for someone else's mortal sin. He gave an involuntary shiver.

A small metal table next to the slab bore a range of surgical instruments and paraphernalia, everything from a saw to a scalpel, including a large kidney bowl for samples. Ceiling-mounted strip lights gave the room a clinical gleam, and an overhead lamp on a moveable arm was poised over the body, illuminating the woman's now-skeletal face and casting eerie shadows in the sockets where her eyes used to be. Two other slabs were laid out in the room, both unoccupied. Honoré was thankful for the opportunity to take a look at the body alone. He edged closer to the table, removing his hat, partly as a gesture of respect, partly to allow him to see more clearly. Bending cautiously over the body, he understood immediately what had confused the police, and also what had drawn him here. The upper torso of the woman was covered in a black, gossamer-like material that Honoré instinctively knew wouldn't be invented for at least another 50 years. What was more, the runes that had been etched into her bones – bizarre pictograms and swirling, concentric symbols – seemed to give off a faint blue glow. Honoré knew – although he wasn't quite sure where the knowledge came from – that the etchings had been done not only well before the building collapsed, but also while the woman was still *alive*. He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to drown out the sudden sound of her screaming inside his head; a twisted wowl of torment that sounded more animal than human. He opened his eyes again, confused, only to be struck by a vision of a twisting, dancing timesnake that seemed to swirl out from the body on the slab, a wreath of time lines swimming through the air like an electric blue halo. He reached his hand out to touch it, then drew back immediately, as if it burned. He tried to focus, to regain control of his vision and his mind.



*He was seeing the timesnake of a dead person!* What's more, no *living* person he had ever encountered had had a timesnake that had left as deep an impression on the timelines as this, not even the other time travellers he had met, not even...

Honoré turned his back on the woman and breathed. He closed his eyes, blotting out the world. When he opened them again, Emily was stood in front of him, watching him intently.

'Is everything all right, Honoré?' She laid a hand on his arm, concerned. 'You look ill.'

'What? How?' he stuttered, completely at a loss. There was a connection here and he couldn't find it.

Emily guided him slowly away from the body. 'I told them I was your assistant, running late because of the weather.' She shrugged, her coat dripping water all over the floor. 'I needed to talk.'

'So you followed me here?' His face was cast in stark relief in the clinical light of the morgue.

'Is that so bad? I was worried about you, Honoré. I needed to see you were okay. Are you okay?' She glanced at the body on the slab. 'Oh my...'

Honoré put his hand on her shoulder. 'I'm so sorry, Emily. It's just...'

'I understand.'

'I'm not sure you do. This person – this cadaver – it shouldn't *be* here.'

'Is this one of your clients? I...'

'No, Emily. What I mean is: it shouldn't be in this *time*.'

'Oh.'

'I can see it, I can see everything.' He didn't like the gleam in her eyes. He could see the beginnings of excitement welling there. It was dangerous; they'd agreed enough was enough, and now it was starting all over again...

'What do you mean?'

'I can see her timesnake. She's dead, Emily, and I can still see her timesnake. And she's been so horribly tortured.' He turned towards the

body, indicating the markings with his hand. ‘This was done while she was still alive.’

‘But we said we’d stop, Honoré. We said we’d give it up, that we couldn’t turn into those people.’ She didn’t sound too certain. ‘We need to think it through.’

Like they were going to go home and discuss it over a cup of tea? Honoré suppressed a smile. He knew as well as she did that they were both already too far committed, that there was no turning back – there hadn’t been since he’d first read the newspaper article. ‘Emily. I know I haven’t been around, and I know we haven’t... talked much recently, but I really think we need to do this. I have a feeling. A feeling that something is going to happen soon. I’ve been trying to ignore it, but I can’t do it any more. This is it. Right here, right now. Give me your hand.’

They looked each other in the eye.

‘Are we good?’ he asked, smiling at her. It was like the old times. Both of them animated, excited, ready for an adventure.

She gave him her hand. ‘We’re good.’

They turned towards the body and Honoré closed his eyes.

Inspector Harris stepped though the doorway into the morgue’s dingy entrance hall, followed by two uniformed officers and a civilian dressed in a suit and overcoat. The civilian set about shaking out his umbrella in the corner, much to the annoyance of the old man on the desk.

Harris approached the desk. The clerk raised an eyebrow but didn’t look up from his log book. ‘Inspector Harris, Scotland Yard. I’m here to escort Dr Morrow to the body that was excavated yesterday from the ruins by Spitalfields market. He’s to carry out a post-mortem examination this afternoon.’

The old man looked up from his notes and chewed thoughtfully on the end of his pencil. ‘Well, sir, you’d better hurry along. That French-sounding chap and his assistant you sent along earlier, I don’t suppose they’ve finished in there yet.’

‘What the...?’ Harris, eyes widening, turned and bolted down the corridor. A moment later he burst into the examination room, to see nothing but the skeletal corpse of a woman and the wispy trace of a strange, blue, electrical light playing around the edges of the slab.

# The Wreckage of Time

London 2586

## 1

The sky was a fiery hell unleashed upon the world.

Like a bruised eyelid, it flickered over the landscape, the sun a watery eye that cast a doleful bronze glow across the shattered skyline. On the horizon, as far as the eye could see, the remnants of tall, baroque buildings littered the view, scraping at the underside of clouds that seemed pregnant with the promise of storms, and worse.

Honoré slammed into consciousness with a start. His head was reeling, his vision momentarily narrow and tunnel-like, as if the world was closing in all around him. He fought for breath, trying desperately not to pass out. Beside him, Emily was lying unconscious on the floor, her clothes dirty and mussed by the fall and covered in a brown-red dust that seemed to cling to every surface. He had no idea where they were, but he had a strong sense of other-worldliness. He glanced around quickly, trying to ensure they were in no immediate danger. They were in the middle of some sort of square or piazza, with little or no cover to hand if things went suddenly bad. He felt nervous and edgy, fearful in a way he hadn't been since the War. Something about the place was just *wrong*.

He collected his hat from the ground a few feet away, shook the dust off it and placed it back on his head. Then he knelt carefully down beside Emily and attempted to rouse her. Her hair was loose and fanned out around her face in the dirt and, not for the first time, Honoré was taken aback by her beauty, by the quiet, serene mask that settled on her face when she slept.

He brushed the side of her cheek with his hand, speaking her name. After a moment, she stirred her head, sighing as if waking for the first time that day, then cautiously opened her eyes. Honoré met her gaze. ‘Tough ride, huh?’

‘Mmmm.’ She stared past him to the strange skyline beyond. ‘Where are we?’

‘I’ve no idea. But we need to find shelter. This place doesn’t feel safe to me.’

‘Okay.’ She smiled up at him and reached out to grab hold of his outstretched arm. He lifted her up, making sure she hadn’t hurt herself during the space-time jump.

‘Oh my God!’ Her sudden exclamation was enough to make Honoré start. He spun around to see what had startled her. About 30 feet away, a bizarre-looking creature was gambolling through the ruins of an old building, its feet clumping loudly as it loped across the shattered stone floor. The thing appeared to be covered entirely in a thick grey hide and its facial details looked as though they had worn smooth, like the gargoyle on the side of an ancient, crumbling manor house or church. Indeed, the more Honoré studied the creature, the more it looked like exactly that – a stone gargoyle lifted wholesale from an ancient monument and somehow given life, as attested to by its glowing red eyes. Even the stubby wings on the creature’s back added to the sense that it was somehow derived from an old monument, carved like a stone homunculus. Its movements were jerky and awkward, and he thought it might have even looked funny, in a different time and place. But right now he had to think of their safety. He held his finger to his lips and gestured to Emily to remain quiet. A minute or two later and the strange creature had loped away without seeing them.

He breathed a sigh of relief. ‘Close call.’

‘What the hell *was* that?’ Emily asked, attempting to shake the cloying red dust off her clothes.

‘I’ve no idea,’ replied Honoré, ‘but as crazy as it sounds, something gives me the feeling that we’re no longer on Earth...’ He gestured at

the sky and surrounding landscape with a wave of his arm. The terrain was like the aftermath of some sort of Armageddon; a blasted, ruined city, thick with the accumulated detritus of years. The red dust seemed to cover every available surface, and the watery sun cast a pale bronze light over the entire scene; a perpetual, unwelcome twilight. Save for the bizarre creature they had just seen, there were no signs of life anywhere – no birds, no trees, no people.

‘But...’ Emily stammered, seemingly unable to continue.

‘It’s like some sort of war zone, but unlike anything I saw back home. Like they’ve blighted their entire world to win a war, and now there’s no one left to appreciate it anyway.’ He cleared his throat, trying to cough the dust out. He could even now feel it working its way into his clothes and shoes, prickling his eyes and his lungs. ‘Look, I’m not feeling comfortable out here, especially with that *thing* so close. Let’s find some cover and try to work out where we are, and what it is exactly that we’re trying to do.’

‘Okay, deal.’ Emily offered a half-smile, but Honoré knew that deep down she was as anxious as he was about the whole scenario. The first time they had travelled together in months, and already things seemed to have taken a turn for the worse. What if they could never get home from this place? He couldn’t get the thought out of his mind. On the one hand he had learned that he was able to read the timesnakes of dead people – or at least, those of dead *displaced* people – and on the other he had to deal with the fact that he was now probably stranded on *another planet* with no obvious way to get home. He wished for a moment that he’d decided to stay in bed that morning after all.

He turned to Emily and indicated a direction heading away from the path the strange gargoyle creature had taken. ‘I vote we go that way.’

Emily nodded. ‘Fine by me.’

‘Come on then. We’re not going to get anywhere standing around here.’ Honoré folded his damp coat over his arm and set off through the ruins of the unfamiliar city, his feet raising small clouds of the red dust in his wake.

After about an hour of picking their way through the rubble, Honoré was starting to think that his initial conclusions about their destination were wide of the mark. The ruined streets seemed incredibly old, but nevertheless incredibly *human* in their construction. The buildings were certainly all of a size suitable for human habitation, and while the place seemed deserted now, he was starting to believe that humans had once lived here. He'd never been to an alien planet, but the Earth of the far future that he had visited with the help of Sanfeil, one of the inhabitants of that time<sup>2</sup>, had seemed so other-worldly that it might as well have been one. Despite this, he'd always assumed in the back of his mind that every aspect of an alien world would be spectacularly unfamiliar: different types of buildings, different colours, different sizes. Not to mention different life-forms. Maybe that's what the gargoyle-creature they'd seen earlier was.

An answer of sorts presented itself a few minutes later when they came across an old billboard lying in the crumbled remnants of a building. It was difficult to see in the strange, almost-sepia half-light, but when he brushed away the dust with his sleeve, he could just about make it out. The picture appeared to show a beach scene, with children playing in the cool, azure waves as their parents looked on from the golden sand of the beach itself. The sun was streaming down on them, lighting up their bronze skin, as they toasted each other with glasses full to the brim with sparkling wine. The legend read: '*You* could be here tomorrow with trans-mat!' It was sickly-sweet, but definitely human in origin.

Honoré called Emily over to see. She shuffled over from where she'd been exploring on the other side of the road and clambered up onto the pile of stones where Honoré was perched. From this vantage point they had a great view over the tops of the ruined buildings and out across the blasted landscape of the city.

He showed her the billboard. 'Do you think we're on some sort of colony world? A place where humans came after they had left the Earth?'

It would make sense – look, the sign's written in English.'

'Honoré?'

'Not sure what happened though. Must have been some sort of war. The place is a deserted shell. No-one's lived here for many years.' He stroked his beard thoughtfully.

'Honoré?'

'I guess we should just keep moving. Hopefully, we'll find somewhere safe to spend the night. I guess we could just...'

*'Honoré!'*

He glanced up at Emily.

'We're not on a colony world.'

He frowned. 'How do you know?'

'Because I'm looking at Big Ben.' Her face was as white as a sheet.

Honoré followed her gaze. The remnants of London's once great clock tower stood proudly on the horizon, its face shattered, the long arm missing, its tower half splintered away as if something had crashed into the side of it long ago and it had never been repaired. It was ghostly, a shimmering apparition in the distance, and Emily and Honoré stood in stunned silence whilst they tried to take it in.

'We're still in London.' Honoré's voice was barely a whisper. 'Where have all the people gone?'

'Oh, Honoré.' Emily's voice cracked in reply. 'Something has gone terribly, terribly wrong. It's just so...'

Honoré put his arm uncertainly around her, unsure what he could say that would make her feel any different. Inside, his mind was reeling at the thought of all those people, the whole of London, gone. He pulled her close, as much to comfort himself as to comfort her. If this was the future, how could they just stand by and let it happen?



‘How can you say that?’

Honoré sounded exasperated. ‘Emily, you’ve seen it with your own eyes! We’ve got to do *something*. I’m not prepared to just sit here and wait for an opportunity to try to get home. There must be something we can do, something that will stop this awful place ever coming into existence. It can’t be inevitable that things will end up this way.’

‘But we agreed. We agreed we wouldn’t become those people. We wouldn’t meddle with time.’ She knew she was losing the argument, and in truth, she’d already made up her mind. But a small part of her wanted to test Honoré’s resolve, to be sure he really was as committed as he seemed. Somehow she knew that he had to be there for her, that without him, she couldn’t do whatever it was they were here to do. Because they were here to do *something* – of that she was certain.

‘This is different.’ Honoré was determined. ‘I can’t explain why, but it is. This place *shouldn’t exist*. I can feel it in my bones. *Trust me*. We have to find a way to put it right.’

They were sitting by the side of the road, their still-damp clothes now almost completely caked in the red dust, trying to decide what to do next. They’d continued wandering around for an hour or two after seeing the wreckage of Big Ben in the distance, and had so far detected no signs of human – or animal – habitation.

‘Okay. Say I was to go along with this. Where would we start?’ Emily’s face broke into a smile. Honoré looked visibly relieved, and she knew she’d been right. And if he thought it was his idea, so much the better.

‘I guess we’d start with what we know. Big Ben?’

‘As good a place as any.’ She wondered what other London landmarks still remained.

Honoré climbed to his feet, dusting his hands. Then, without warning, he bolted into the shell of a nearby building, some sort of office complex or abandoned hotel. The frontage of the structure was

almost completely missing and an assortment of furniture had spilled out onto the road. He hissed at Emily over his shoulder to follow.

A moment later she was by his side, ducking low behind a row of overturned desks, gasping for breath. ‘What...?’

‘Shhh!’ He pointed out at the street.

Another of the strange gargoyle-like creatures was lumbering through the rubble, loping around as if searching for something, or someone. It made a rasping, grating noise as it moved – the sound of stone grating against stone. When it reached the side of the road, it cocked its head to one side and flexed its strange, stony wings. Emily was sure it was listening out for them, as though it had sensed their presence nearby.

Honoré motioned to her to lean closer and spoke in hushed tones. ‘Stay down. I’m going to get a better look.’

She nodded, careful not to make any sound. There was something monstrously evil about the beasts, and she had no inclination to investigate further herself, so she watched as Honoré edged slowly forward and risked a glance around the side of one of the broken desks they were using as cover.

The creature was about 20 feet away, across the foyer of the building and out on the other side of the street. It looked similar to the one they’d seen when they’d first arrived, but subtly different. It reminded Emily of a winged goblin or demon, but its features were barely distinguishable. Its face was worn almost completely smooth, and she wondered how it was able to see with no eyes. Its arms and legs were crooked and it moved with a slow, deliberate gait on all fours, as if it were propelling itself along on limbs that had never been designed for movement. Moss had grown up around its lower body and spread in patches over its torso, giving the impression that the thing had been stationary for some time and had only recently taken to stalking the streets. What had at first seemed to be thick, grey hide now looked more like chiselled stone, as if the creature – or whatever it actually was – had been carved from solid rock. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she became convinced that it really was an old religious statue that had somehow

been animated. The very thought of it sent a shiver along her spine. Gargoyles were supposed to ward off evil spirits, weren't they? Not turn into them.

The thing continued to stand at the side of the road, patiently waiting for any signs of movement. Honoré glanced back at her. Her view of the street outside was hampered by a large supporting pillar, although this did at least afford her additional cover from the strange monster. She considered shuffling over to join Honoré, not wanting to be physically separated from him in this strange place. But he waved her down, and the creature shifted suddenly, sensing his movements. It raised its arm and flicked its wrist in their direction. There was a sudden spark, and the desk in front of Honoré simply disappeared.

Honoré looked shocked. The thing had just pointed at an inanimate object and made it *vanish into thin air*. His jaw hung slack with disbelief. There was now nothing between him and the gargoyle, and Emily saw a look of alarm cross his face. Eyes not leaving the figure, she reached behind her and groped in the debris until her hand curled over what felt like a lump of metal. She pulled it towards her and, in a single movement, lifted and hurled it across the space, away from where Honoré was standing.

There was a bang from the other side of the foyer as the object hit the wall. As she'd hoped, the creature tracked the sound with its unseeing eyes. But in doing so, it obviously deduced her position. A few seconds later, her cover was well and truly blown, as the desk behind which she'd been crouched vanished in a second shower of sparks. Now they were both exposed. She met Honoré's eyes and wondered which of them the beast would attack first. Maybe the other would be able to get away? But then what? Alone, there was no way out of this time, whenever it was. They needed to be a pair.

Honoré was moving, and she knew he was doing it to give her a chance to escape. Her eyes filled with sudden tears. Would she ever see him again? He was sprinting for the exit and she was closing her eyes, not wanting to watch the inevitable, when...

... a sound like thunder filled the air. Emily's eyes snapped open in surprise, and she saw Honoré diving for cover, his military training assuming command of his faculties. He hit the floor, his arms folded over his head, his face buried in the crook of his elbow to protect his eyes from the flash of the blast, as bits of building rained down all around him, fragments of stone and mortar pattering against the back of his jacket and showering him with dust.

The creature had vanished in the explosion and Emily looked around wildly, half convinced that it was about to sneak up on her from a different angle, that maybe the blast had been its way of ensuring it got both of them in one hit. But there was nothing. Brick and cement dust made her eyes water as she stood up, dazed. Where the creature had stood was now no more than a smouldering black footprint, a Mandelbrot pattern of soot and melting tarmac. All around, tiny fragments of grey stone had been scattered, deposited far and wide by the power of the blast.

She got to her feet, fine particles of debris falling to the floor around her. Across the ruined foyer, Honoré was stirring, peering out from the crook of his elbow, but Emily didn't have a chance to take things slowly. Someone was shouting to them.

'Quick! Come *on*. Before it re-forms!' The voice was a harsh bark, demanding instant obedience.

Emily scrambled across to Honoré and they turned to see the source of the voice. Three people – two men and a woman – were standing on the far side of the road, gathered in a small huddle where they'd obviously emerged from the ruins of another building. One of the men was holding a huge weapon; the other was gesticulating wildly. All of them, including the woman, were dressed in black, one-piece coveralls, with equipment and armaments adorning their belts. They looked like soldiers or mercenaries – they were certainly life-savers.

The man who'd been gesturing to them shouted again, more impatiently. 'Let's go. *Now!*'

Emily's ears were still ringing from the blast, but Honoré had grabbed her arm and they were already moving, dashing towards the group of

soldiers who still had their weapons trained on the smouldering space where the gargoyle creature had been. Emily figured that anything had to be better than meeting another of those creatures, and at the moment it was a black and white choice. There'd be shades of grey later – there were always shades of grey – but she could deal with them when they arose. Right now, they needed to find shelter.

She started to say something, to thank them, but the man with the bazooka cut her off. 'No time to talk. Gods, it's starting to re-form already.' He nodded his head towards the pile of stone fragments, which seemed to be coalescing in the middle of the road.

Honoré shook his head, dust flying. 'You mean it can...?'

'Yes. So let's move it. Now!'

The woman had hold of Emily's arm and was guiding her away at a brisk pace. Emily in turn was keeping hold of Honoré. She'd almost lost him a few moments ago and wasn't about to risk it again. From the corner of her eye, she could see the creature reassembling, chips of stone becoming pebbles and then boulders, sliding together – sometimes liquid, sometimes solid – and starting to form an outline. It was a compulsive sight, but she was distracted by another pull on her arm. 'It helps if you don't watch,' the woman said.

Emily chewed her lip thoughtfully and let herself be led away.

‘What the *hell* were you doing out there?’

Emily glanced at Honoré. ‘We were just...’

‘We’ve just arrived.’ He interrupted her, his voice confident. ‘We’re not from around these parts.’

They were running along a dark, underground tunnel. The only illumination came from the blinking electrical beacons attached to each of the soldiers’ belts. It created an eerie, strobe-like effect in the confined space of the tunnel, like they were blinking suddenly in-and-out of existence as they ran.

The soldiers had hurried to a manhole in the ground near to where the gargoyle creature had attacked them. They’d clambered down iron rungs and dropped to the tunnel floor in the dark, and it wasn’t until the metal cover had been replaced over the hole that they had fired up their beacons. Honoré thought that the tunnels could have once been sewers, but if that was true, it was no longer the case – they were dry and echoed every footfall as they ran. They hadn’t had time to ask questions yet, although he had managed to pick up a couple of the soldiers’ names as they barked commands at each other.

The man named Micah stopped dead in his tracks and wheeled around to face them, repeating what Honoré had said, ‘You’re not from around these parts?’ The others came to a sudden halt beside him. Honoré caught Emily by the arm.

The woman, Hannah, put her hand to her mouth in apparent shock. ‘My Gods. They’re *Hunted*. We’ve gone and picked up two freakin’ Hunted.’ She started pacing back-and-forth, obviously flustered, until Micah waved her still.

‘Hunted or not, they were in trouble. What else were we to do?’

The other man, whose name Honoré thought might be either Gray or Clay, was nodding. ‘Look. It’s done now. Let’s get back to base and make sure everyone’s okay. *Then* we can decide what to do next. Here’s

not the place for an argument.'

Emily cleared her throat. 'Excuse me. You seem to be forgetting that we're actually *standing here...*' She looked exasperated and tired. 'We're very grateful, but don't we get a say in all this? And what exactly do you mean by "Hunted"?'

Micah shook his head. 'Not now. Gray's right. Let's get you somewhere safe first. Then we can talk.' He pulled a small handgun from a holster on his hip and waved it in the direction they'd been running. 'Come on; this way.' He set off again, his boots clattering loudly on the dry tunnel floor.

They emerged from the darkness into a bright, stinging light. They'd hurried on for about half an hour, following the contours of the tunnel as it snaked beneath the ruined city, every inch bringing them closer, Honoré hoped, to some answers. Eventually they'd come to another ladder and Micah had helped them scramble up the rungs until they reached a metal hatch at the top. He'd rapped a pass code on the underside with his knuckles and, although it wasn't the most elaborate or foolproof of systems, it seemed to work, for a moment afterwards, the hatch had eased open and they'd been able to pull themselves through.

Now they were standing in a small chamber that was flooded with a harsh white light. Honoré tried to see what was going on, but all he could make out were a few shadowy figures and an array of lamps. His eyes were stinging and he could feel tears trickling down his cheeks. Micah and the others were all covering their eyes from the glare. Giving them the benefit of the doubt, he followed suit. A moment later, the light abated and he was able to open his eyes again. Baubles danced in front of his vision for a few moments while he adjusted to the dim glow once again.

Hannah approached him, nervously, noticing his discomfort. 'Sorry. Should have warned you. Decontamination chamber. In a moment you'll be given a quick shot, too, and then we can get you out of those dirty clothes and find you something to eat.' She looked over at Emily.

‘Are you hurt? Either of you?’

Emily met her gaze. ‘Just a few bruises. Nothing I can’t handle.’

Honoré shook his head, agreeing. ‘No. But I’m not sure I like the idea of a shot. What exactly do we need decontaminating *from*?’

‘Radiation, mainly, although we’re not sure exactly what else is out there: dirty nanotech, viruses, psionic magic. Just a precaution really.’ She smiled, for the first time since they’d met. ‘Not scared of a little needle, are we?’

Emily moved over to stand beside Honoré. ‘I’m sure we can cope.’

Hannah shrugged, still smiling. ‘Good.’ She glanced over her shoulder. ‘Come on, let’s go.’

They filed out behind the others, leaving the stark decontamination room behind them and moving into a slightly larger chamber that resembled nothing so much as a politician’s office. A torn Union Jack hung on one wall and the floor was covered by what had once been a plush red carpet; now dirty and worn, it looked like everything else in this bleak version of the future: tired, old and forgotten.

A man was sitting behind a large oak desk, a row of metal kidney bowls lined up in front of him, each one containing a hypodermic syringe and a wad of white swabbing. He stood up as they filed in, revealing his once-white coat to be covered in numerous alarming brown stains. Honoré recognised dried blood. This was obviously the soldiers’ medic. The man smiled, his face cracking warmly with lines and wrinkles that betrayed his age. He must have been around 60 years old, Honoré guessed – probably near enough the combined age of the three soldiers who had brought them in. Perhaps, later, if the others proved reluctant to talk, he’d find this doctor a little more forthcoming.

‘Micah – I see you’ve brought guests!’ The man looked Honoré and Emily up-and-down, still smiling. ‘Where did you find these two, eh? Lurking in the sewers?’

Micah looked suddenly grave. ‘No, Jand, we think they’re Hunted.’

The smile dropped from the medic’s face. ‘What are you playing at, Micah? As if we didn’t have enough problems. Idiot boy.’ He looked



away in disgust, sighing.

‘Jand. Jand – listen! It’s not that simple. They were under attack – we had no choice. By the time we’d taken out the gargoyle and got them into the tunnels, it was already too late. What would you have done? Abandon them?’ Micah glowered at Honoré, as if it was his fault that the doctor was giving him such a hard time.

Jand shook his head. ‘I don’t know, Micah. I really don’t know. But *you’re* going to have to tell the old lady.’ He met Emily’s eyes once again. ‘You understand, don’t you? Having you here puts every one of us at risk. It’s not that I don’t care...’

Emily smiled. ‘To be honest, I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

Honoré had to agree with her, wishing that they could backtrack a bit and start at the beginning.

Jand glanced at Micah. ‘Look. I’ll pass them through. Just this once. But they’ll have to be gone again by nightfall. And anyone starts asking questions, it’s on your head.’ He beckoned to Emily to come closer. ‘Over here. Pull up your sleeve.’

Emily slipped her coat off her shoulders and passed it to Honoré. Then, rolling up the sleeve of her cardigan, she crossed the room and presented her arm to the medic. Honoré chose not to watch as the man inserted the needle into her arm and pressed the plunger.

A few moments later, Jand had finished administering the decontamination shots. Honoré was still suspicious of these people’s motives, but having watched each of the soldiers go through the procedure first, as well as Emily, he was a little more at ease. He noted with a wry smile that the medic had chosen to record only three shots in his logbook; officially he and Emily didn’t exist, and he was covering his own back in case someone came asking questions later. This ‘Hunted’ thing really seemed to have them all spooked. And if they were supposedly ‘Hunted’, then who or what was hunting them?

When the necessary paperwork had been completed – it transpired that Micah and his crew had been out on a reconnaissance mission and

needed to record their findings – Honoré and Emily were led along a narrow passageway that opened up into a much larger space.

Emily came to a sudden halt, gasping in shock. ‘Honoré! We’re in the Houses of Parliament.’

Honoré had to do a double-take. Emily was right. He’d never been inside the Houses of Parliament, but he’d seen pictures, and this was unmistakably Westminster Hall, the oldest part of the building, erected in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. But things had gone decidedly downhill. There was a large hole in the roof, which was now covered by a large patchwork of tarpaulin and plastic sheeting. Ivy climbed in intricate webs over the walls, and the boughs of an oak tree had pushed their way through a window, encroaching into the building itself and leaving the place open to the elements. Red dust had swirled in from outside, dancing on the wind, and now caked most visible surfaces, including the floor. What horrified Honoré the most, however, were the rows of tents and makeshift shanty huts that had been erected in the Hall, many of them formed by pushing bits of old furniture together and draping blankets over the top. People clustered around old bins that had been turned into braziers, most of them dressed in rags, with only one or two of the men wearing the black, one-piece coveralls that suggested they were soldiers like Micah, Gray and Hannah. Honoré didn’t know what to say.

Breaking the awkward silence, Gray turned to regard him, a smile curling on his lips. ‘Welcome to our home.’

No-one seemed to know how long ago the world had been blighted. There were tales of alien entities coming from the stars to wreak havoc upon the Earth, of ancient creatures rising out of the oceans to reclaim their ancestral homeland, and of humans turning themselves into armies of murderous machines. To Honoré, the majority of these stories seemed like nothing but fables, told by mothers to explain away the terrors that haunted their children, and their husbands, at night. Yet he suspected that there were kernels of truth to them. There was one name that featured in nearly all the tales, a name that he and Emily had heard

before on their travels: the Sodality. This, apparently, was a secret society that had made a pact with the Devil and then defaulted on its side of the bargain. The people involved, the places, the circumstances, they all varied; but the gist of the stories was always the same: this Sodality had gambled with the fate of the Earth, and had lost. *How* the planet had been destroyed became almost immaterial. What mattered was the fact that it *had* been destroyed, and with it, the majority of the human race. Honoré was no academic, and although he'd seen some bizarre things in his time – especially in the last few years – he couldn't bring himself to believe in pacts with devils and demons. Nevertheless, he also knew that there was no smoke without fire, so somewhere in there, amongst the embellishments, lurked a version of the truth. One thing he felt sure of, though, was that they were unlikely to find it here.

He and Emily were resting in the soldiers' mess with Gray and Hannah. Micah had disappeared some time earlier, after showing them to a locker room where they'd been given a pair of black coveralls to change into and allowed to shower. Emily was thankful to have got out of her still-damp clothes, even though the unfamiliar fabric of the coveralls now scratched at her skin. Honoré had been reluctant to discard his familiar shirt and trousers, even though they were filthy with the clinging red dust, but had eventually agreed, although he had retained his hat and leather trench coat regardless.

The mess was a confusion of sounds, sights and smells. The place was buzzing with a palpable energy as squad after squad of soldiers changed shift, coming back through from their decontamination sessions to wash and find something to eat. There was an entirely different feel to this area of the building than the civilian spaces they'd seen earlier; it was much more organised, clean and practical. The civilian population, which couldn't have numbered more than a few hundred people, seemed to be clinging on to the soldiers for safety, or at least the perception of safety, that they offered. Honoré could see the attraction. In a world that had gone completely mad, the impulse to stay close to the people with the big guns was entirely understandable.

Emily sipped at her oily coffee while he sat brooding, silently, beside her.

After a while, Gray broke the awkward silence. He caught Honoré's eye, sighing. 'You understand that, after you've had something to eat, we're going to have to ask you to leave.'

Honoré looked him squarely in the face. 'I don't really understand, no. We're both healthy – we can both use a gun.'

'I'm sorry, it's just...'

'It's just that you present a risk to us and the civvies simply by being here.' Hannah had come around behind them and was now placing trays of food in front of them; a bowl of grey stew and a piece of hard bread each. She sat down beside Honoré, and her demeanour seemed to soften a little. 'If we're right, if you're actually Hunted, then the gargoyles are going to keep coming after you, and we really can't afford to spend all our ammunition fighting them off. At the moment, they leave us alone.'

Emily gave her a quizzical look. 'What do you mean when you say "Hunted"? Who would be hunting us, and why? We haven't done anything.'

Hannah glanced at Gray, nervously, before continuing. 'Look. We don't really know *what* it is the creatures want. We don't even know what they really are. But we do know that some people have *something* they want. It's rare, and we don't see it very often, but when we do, it's always the same.'

Gray chipped in. 'It's like they can smell it or something. Some genetic or biological trait that seems to drive them into a frenzy.'

Hannah looked into the middle distance. 'I hate this,' she said. 'I saw one soldier taken by them. It was awful. The poor man.'

Gray put his hand on her arm. 'Don't worry,' he reassured her. 'They won't get you.'

'Which is why we have to be careful,' Hannah finished, looking again at Honoré and Emily. 'They'll search you out, wherever you go in the city, and if they can, they'll take you prisoner.'

Honoré was paying attention now. ‘Prisoner? I thought they were hunters? Killers? The one we met out in the street didn’t look like it was trying to take us prisoner.’

‘It depends. It’s unusual for them to attack at all. Usually they just ignore us, as if we don’t really exist. But people like you,’ Gray waved his hand, indicating them both, ‘are clearly a target for some reason. Like Hannah said, we can’t afford for them to come here, not with all the civvies.’

‘What do you mean, *people like us?*’ pressed Honoré.

‘I mean people who seem to arrive out of nowhere. Strangers. Persons of unknown origin...’ He let that hang for a moment. ‘People from other places, other *times*, drawn here like moths to a flame.’

Honoré and Emily glanced at each other, unsure what to say next. Thankfully for both of them, Hannah came to their rescue.

‘Anyway, eat your slop,’ she said. ‘Afterwards, we’ll see you on your way. We’ll give you a weapon each, a small amount of ammo, and some provisions. Then you’re on your own.’ Then, almost as an afterthought, ‘Oh, and take some advice. Don’t go anywhere near St Paul’s Cathedral. It’s not safe. There are monsters in the dark...’

‘Dr... Smith?’ The acolyte fidgeted nervously with a handful of paper. ‘If you’d like to follow me.’

The other man rose from his chair, a wry smile on his face. He was thin and gangly, his black hair receding to reveal a domed head, his features serious but care-worn. Given the surroundings – the semi-ruined splendour of the former Buckingham Palace – he seemed a little out of place in his plum-coloured velvet smoking jacket and formal black trousers, but if he was aware of the fact, he showed no sign. He nodded at the acolyte, who smoothed the front of his black robes nervously. ‘Please, lead the way.’

The acolyte led Dr Smith down a long, high-ceilinged corridor, the now-peeling walls of which were lined with an array of dusty old paintings. Dr Smith frowned for a moment as he passed a massive canvas depicting the beheading of King Charles I. He shook his head, mumbling to himself as he walked: ‘No, no. That’s not how it happened.’ The acolyte chose to ignore the remark, fixing his gaze on the other end of the corridor and the large set of oak doors that marked their destination.

Momentarily, they came to a stop. The acolyte bade Dr Smith remain outside while, after rapping briskly on the door, he turned the handle and stepped through into the room beyond. There was a brief exchange of voices, and then the acolyte reappeared and ushered Dr Smith in.

A slim young woman was seated on an ornate throne at the other end of the enormous chamber. Doorways punctuated the walls on either side of the huge space, and at each of them stood another acolyte, arms folded behind his back, face half hidden behind the shadowy cowl of a black robe. Dr Smith looked around, taking it all in. ‘It’s cold in here,’ he announced, to no-one in particular.

‘Indeed it is, Dr Smith,’ the woman on the throne agreed. ‘Come closer, please. We have much to discuss.’

Dr Smith allowed his face to show his disapproval at the manner in which the woman was sprawled on her elaborate seat. ‘Couldn’t we go somewhere a little... cosier to talk?’

‘I think not. It would hardly be appropriate for the High Executioner of the Sodality to be seen treating her guests as equals now, would it?’

Dr Smith shook his head again, his demeanour visibly darkening. ‘Such vanity. Such egotism. I haven’t come here to spar with you, or to pander to you, or anything of the sort. I simply await your answer. Have the Sodality’s Ruling Council,’ he nearly spat the words, ‘reached their decision yet?’

‘Come now, Dr Smith. You know you wouldn’t be here if we hadn’t.’  
‘Well?’

‘I’m afraid we are going to have to decline your offer.’

There was a long pause. Dr Smith reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a thin packet of cigarettes. He deliberately placed one of the small white sticks between his pursed lips, flared a match, and lit it. He inhaled deeply, then exhaled a ribbon of smoke through his nostrils. ‘You try my patience.’ He glared at her fiercely. ‘You don’t understand what you’re dealing with.’

‘No, you’re right. We don’t. Did you honestly expect us to trust you? Really? A stranger, who appears out of nowhere, declares he knows all our plans and claims he can help us hunt down and terminate the remnants of our experiments?’

‘Experiments? They’re people!’

‘They’re vessels. They wouldn’t exist if it hadn’t been for the Sodality. Our reach is long, Dr Smith, and our intentions pure. We aim to change things for the better. To give humanity control over time...’

Dr Smith sprinkled ash from the end of his cigarette with a flourish. He frowned. ‘Something they little understand. Look,’ he pointed at her with the tip of his cigarette, emphasising his point, ‘the creature you plan to summon has already declared your *experiments* an aberration. If you leave even a single time channeller or time sensitive alive, it will destroy the Earth, and your whole species will be wiped out! I have no

appetite for killing, I assure you, but in this instance, it is very much the lesser of two evils.’

Anger flashed in the High Executioner’s eyes. ‘My agents have been dedicated and ruthless! They have scoured the timelines for the rogue elements, found and killed hundreds of them. A few remain, it is true. But how could you hope to succeed where my agents have failed? Besides, it is of no consequence. We have done enough. The creature will be satisfied.’

‘You really think you can pull off such a deception? Believe me, it will be seen through.’

‘You underestimate us, Dr Smith! We are the Sodality! No creature, however powerful, will prevail against us.

‘I suppose this wouldn’t have anything to do with the fact that you’re a time channeller yourself, would it? Hmmm?’

The High Executioner was visibly taken aback. ‘How did you...? No matter. The ceremony will be a success, our plan will move forward, and the human race will survive and develop, as it always has. Your help is neither needed nor wanted.’

Dr Smith dropped the stub of his cigarette to the floor, where it continued to smoulder. He met her gaze. ‘These creatures, they’re not what you think they are. They’re scientists. To them, the human race is as much an experiment as your frankly loathsome tinkering with your own evolution. If, or should that be when, they find you have deceived them, they will terminate their experiment without compunction and bring an end to human history.’ He ground his cigarette stub into the carpet with his heel.

The woman was smiling.

Dr Smith turned to leave. ‘I won’t let it happen. I gave you a chance. You could have put things right. It ends now.’ He made his way towards the door.

‘Guards!’

The acolytes swarmed around him, grabbing at him fiercely, pinning his arms behind his back. They turned him around forcibly to face the



woman, who was now climbing down from her ostentatious perch to walk towards him, her hips swinging and her heels clacking on the hard floor. ‘My dear Dr Smith. You didn’t really expect us just to let you walk out of here, did you?’

Dr Smith smiled. ‘Oh, how thoroughly predictable.’

The world was still lit by an eerie bronze twilight as Honoré and Emily climbed out of the manhole and up onto the road. The soldiers had told them it was now late in the evening, but there were no visible signs of change. To Honoré, it felt as if they were trapped in one long moment of time, a drawn-out, protracted second without end, within which the rest of the world was frozen and only what happened here, in this city, now, was of any consequence. Either that, or someone in this blasted future had been playing with the cycles of the Earth and the Sun. Nothing would surprise him any more. He turned to help Emily to her feet.

‘So, where next? Do we need to find somewhere to sleep?’

Emily shrugged. ‘I’m not really tired. Besides, after all that stuff about being hunted, I’m not sure I want to stay in one place for too long. You saw what that creature did to those desks...’

‘I guess you’re right. I don’t think I’d be able to sleep either.’ He looked around, hunting for any landmarks he might recognise. Emily put her hand on his arm.

‘So what do you think’s going on here anyway? We still haven’t seen any sign of the woman whose body brought us here. I can’t fathom how she’d be connected to this time period, unless she’s like us, somehow?’

Honoré shook his head, and then fidgeted with his hat. ‘That’s the only answer, isn’t it? Her body was displaced. She shouldn’t have been in the 1950s. But we’re going to have to find her, eventually, if we want to get home.’ He didn’t have a clue where to start. ‘I suppose we have to work out how we’re going to put all of this right first, though.’ He held both his hands up towards the sky, sweeping his eyes across the ruined cityscape. ‘Any ideas?’

‘How about St Paul’s?’ She moved around to face him, to show him she was serious. ‘If there really are monsters inside, they might be able to tell us more about what’s going on, or point us to someone who will.’

Honoré smiled. Emily was never one to shy away from a challenge. He nodded his consent. ‘Come on then. St Paul’s it is.’

The cathedral loomed out of the twilight like a leviathan rising out of a swamp. Its massive central dome testament to the architectural skills of Christopher Wren: still standing after around 870 years. To Honoré, it seemed to be an enormous dark shadow holding court over a scene of devastation, rubble from collapsed buildings strewn chaotically all around it; supplicants brought to their knees. The silence was extraordinary, too; the lack of animal life, particularly birds, seemed more acute here, and even the wind had lost its plaintive howl. Honoré felt that he and Emily were like interlopers arriving after the event; ghosts haunting the scene of a once-great battle. Calm had set in, and it felt incongruous in the surroundings, the tension of the place seeming to demand something more. Honoré hugged Emily closer, reassuring himself. ‘You sure you want to do this?’

‘I can’t think of anything else we could be doing right now.’

‘True.’ They stood for a moment, contemplating the view, the silence seemingly infecting them too.

The walk had been uneventful, with no sign of any of the gargoyle creatures tracking them through the empty streets. Nevertheless, Honoré had kept a hand in his pocket, curled around his gun – a constant companion he was reluctant to let go. Micah had loaded it with explosive rounds, which he hoped, if necessary, would be powerful enough to bring down one of the weird stone entities. Preferably he wouldn’t have to find out.

Emily made the first move. She started forward, making her way across the rubble-strewn plaza leading up to the building. Honoré followed, watching their backs. As they drew closer, he became aware of a series of large, indistinct objects that had been hung across the entranceway, five or six of them dangling on ropes, swaying in the slight breeze. From this distance, he couldn’t tell exactly what they were, but he felt the stirrings of a dark, brooding feeling welling up inside him.

The short hairs on the back of his neck were standing on end and every sense he had was telling him to turn and run in the opposite direction.

With a dawning sense of fear and disgust, he realised that the things hanging on the ropes were human corpses. Worse than that, though, each of them had been flayed and strung up by its neck, with its arms and legs hacked off near the torso.

Emily gasped, covering her mouth with her hands.

Honoré was by her side. 'Still sure you want to go ahead with this?'

She turned to him, eyes wide, unable to speak. He watched the look in her eyes turn from animalistic terror to steely resolve. She nodded and then, pulling herself together, continued towards the scene of carnage. 'I'm okay, Honoré. This is something we have to do.' He hurried to catch her up.

As they mounted the steps near the mouth of the building, both Honoré and Emily used their sleeves to cover their lower faces, in an effort to stave off the stench of the rotting bodies. It was probably the foulest thing Honoré had ever had the misfortune to smell. Back in his army days, during the War, he'd seen all manner of terrible things, including a rotting cadaver that his squad had happened upon in a farmhouse in Normandy. He'd thought then that nothing could ever be worse than the stench it gave off. But that corpse hadn't been left exposed to the elements as these had; and it hadn't been deliberately mutilated, either. He tried not to look at the remains of the six people dangling in front of him. Emily, however, seemed overcome with a macabre fascination, staying rooted to the spot before them, unable to look away.

Honoré gently took her elbow and moved her along. 'We can bring an end to this, Emily, if we try. Come on. We've got to be ready for whatever it is that did this.' He'd already reached for his gun, almost unconsciously. He brushed past the hanging corpses and approached the large wooden door ahead of them, which seemed to be the main entrance to the Cathedral. There was a circular metal handle to one side, and he reached out and tried it.

It was unlocked. He heaved the door open with his left hand, brandishing the gun in his right, and peered into the gloom beyond, alert for any signs of movement. A moment later, confident that they weren't going to be immediately set upon, they both slipped inside.

The High Executioner stared intently at the monitor screen on the desk in front of her. It showed an image of Dr Smith in the drawing room where she'd had him taken after their confrontation in the throne room a couple of hours earlier. He was seated in a comfortable armchair, legs stretched out lazily in front of him, lighting yet another of his infernal cigarettes. He had made no attempt to leave the room, even though she had posted no acolytes inside with him, and looked for all the world as if he was passing a relaxing evening, enjoying a leisurely smoke. She wasn't fooled though. He would obviously have realised that there would be guards posted outside the room, and probably also that he would be under surveillance, so this studied nonchalance was no doubt just a show for her benefit. She had hoped to leave him stewing there, so that he would be more willing to talk when she eventually went to question him, but she had the uncomfortable feeling that the tables were being turned on her, and that it was she who was being left to stew. Clicking her tongue in frustration, she turned off the screen, rose from the desk, snatched up a file of papers and strode from her room, her acolytes scurrying to keep up with her.

Dr Smith looked up as, in response to a barked command, the door to his room was pushed open and the High Executioner stalked in, motioning her attendant acolytes to remain outside. She was wearing a long black dress and high heels, which clicked noisily on the floorboards as she walked. She placed the file of papers she was carrying on a table to one side, then lowered herself gracefully into the chair opposite Dr Smith.

'Dr Smith, I trust my acolytes have been treating you well?'

'If treating me well means leaving me be, then very well indeed, thank you.' He leaned forward and proffered his packet of cigarettes. 'Smoke?'

'Thank you, no. Dreadful things. Play havoc with my sinuses.'

‘Ah, well. I’m sure you’re right. About that, at least.’ His customary wry smile was written upon his face. ‘Hope you don’t mind if I carry on. It’s just that my body has cravings, you see? Unfamiliar feeling, that, actually. I’m sure you understand. So tell me, when is it exactly that you plan to bring about this planet’s destruction?’

The woman smiled. ‘That again. Really, Dr Smith, I am not so easily provoked. I have something far more interesting for us to discuss: who you are and what it is exactly that you’re doing here.’ She reached across to the table, picked up the file of papers and began leafing through it.

Dr Smith inclined his head, ever so slightly, and tapped another cigarette out of his packet, which seemed just as full as it had before. ‘Let’s just say I’m a traveller who knows what he’s talking about. I have seen a lot of things in my time, on many different worlds, and I speak from experience when I tell you that the course of action you’re pursuing is foolhardy in the extreme. I know you have it in you to see beyond the short-sighted, despotic intentions of this so-called Sodality and stop this now before it goes too far.’

‘What do you mean? You know nothing about me.’ The woman was visibly vexed.

‘I know a great deal. I know you’re not a bad soul. I know about your induction into the Sodality: how your duplicitous lover misled you, how you became embroiled against your will.’

‘Nonsense! I joined the Sodality willingly, indeed eagerly.’

Dr Smith shook his head sadly. ‘Their brainwashing techniques are very advanced. You’re not intrinsically evil. I know that given the chance to live your life over, you’d spend it trying to *help* other people rather than hurt them.’

She cleared her throat and looked pointedly at his cigarette, burning low between his fingers. ‘How could you possibly *know* that? Even if you were right about me.’

‘I told you. I’m a traveller. I’ve seen a lot.’ He sat back in his chair, unfolding his legs. ‘You know, I’d never have put you down for this job, hunting people down, having them killed. Wouldn’t have thought you

had it in you.'

'Ha! I'm very good at my job. I relish it. My agents and... associates have proved a credit to us.'

'But not credit enough, I'll wager. There are still lots of them out there, you know, your *experiments*. Some of them active, some of them latent, some of them hiding in the far reaches of the universe. As for Abraxas and your other manufactured cronies – sloppy work indeed.'

'Dr Smith, exactly how long have you been spying on the Sodality?'

He laughed, a thin, wheezy chuckle that made the woman smile again, despite herself. 'Oh, my dear girl. I wouldn't bother wasting my time with that sort of business. I'm no spy. I haven't the patience for espionage. I prefer action! Action is the key. Charge on in there and sort it all out. We've all spent quite enough time sitting on the sidelines of history.'

'Exactly!' The woman looked animated now, as if he'd just confirmed her argument. 'That's exactly right, Dr Smith. Humanity has been sitting on the sidelines of history. The Sodality will change all that. They'll bring about a new age of enlightenment. Things will never be the same again.'

'Is that how you sleep at night? You tell yourself that? I can assure you, you're wrong. So very, very wrong.' He was shaking his head, disappointment evident on his face. 'Your experiments have already had disastrous consequences. Have you looked outside recently? You gained the ability to travel in time. To go almost anywhere in history. And what did you do? You blighted the Earth and put most of the human race beneath it! You meddled with your own evolution, and now you're trying to hide the results, brush them under the rug. Not only is it dirty, immoral and dangerous, but the creature will see straight through it.'

The woman looked visibly shaken now.

'I'll ask you again, Dr Smith. Who are you?'

'And I'll tell you again, young lady. I'm a traveller who can help you put this right!' He blinked, twice, and then his demeanour changed, softening slightly.



‘Look. I understand that you’re not here by choice. But you’re not trapped. You can walk out of here with me, now, today, and we can do something to sort out this mess you’ve got yourself mixed up in.’

Her expression darkened, anger flashing in her eyes. ‘This *mess I’ve got myself mixed up in* will be the salvation of mankind. My position is one of respect and high status. I have clearly exercised my choice to be here. For God’s sake – I’m the High Executioner of the Sodality! You know nothing about my life!’

‘I know more than you’d care to admit. Interesting that you mentioned God there. Where does that God of yours feature in your big plans?’

She was flustered now, and letting it show. ‘Oh, that’s just a figure of speech. You know that. You’re not a fool.’

‘So you don’t believe in an omnipotent presence? How, then, do you reconcile that with your plan to summon this creature? Mastho certainly isn’t an omnipotent god, or anything of the sort, but I can understand how his psonic science might make it seem that way to you.’

She was staring at him now, wide-eyed. ‘You spoke His name! How dare you speak His name to me!’

‘Oh, calm yourself. It’s not as if he can hear us. Let’s get back to the real issue here: all those remaining time sensitives and time channellers. What are you planning to do about them? When exactly is this summoning of yours? Next week? The week after?’

‘Soon. Sooner than you think. It’s too late to stop it now, even if we wanted to.’

‘It’s never too late! You start by saving yourself. Start there. Admit to *yourself* that you know what you’re doing is wrong. Find the kernel of the person you used to be. Take that anger, that passion, and direct it at something different, something useful. Forget about the treacherous bastard who led you here, his lies and his coercion. Forget about the Sodality and their summoning and the end of the world. Start by saving yourself. The rest will follow.’

The woman looked at him, hesitating. She didn’t seem to know what to say. Dr Smith’s words had clearly affected her, and her resolve

appeared to be weakening. She opened her mouth to say something, but was distracted by a rap at the door. Suddenly alert, she turned in her chair. 'Enter.'

A man in his mid-thirties dressed in a rich purple robe stepped through the door, a group of guards bustling in behind him. The woman's face dropped.

The man in the robe came further into the room and threw back his hood. His face was scarred and pitted; his voice deep and grave. 'Apologies for the interruption...'

Inside the Cathedral, everything was quiet. There didn't appear to be anyone – or *anything* – inside, although the presence of a small campfire burning brightly in the middle of the nave indicated that the place was indeed inhabited. Dry smoke filled the enormous dome above them with hazy clouds. Honoré edged forward, his gun now clutched firmly in both hands, glancing from side to side as he approached the campfire.

Emily watched as Honoré circled the campfire, noting the bedroll and box of provisions nearby, and then carried out a quick reconnaissance of the rest of the area. At least he knew how to handle a gun, she thought, which was more than she did.

The Cathedral's interior was in much the same condition as its exterior – derelict and abandoned. Fragments of stained glass lay like confetti strewn across broken tiles. Most of the artwork and finery that had once made the place such a beacon of culture in the heart of the city, including the elaborate altars, had been smashed or removed. Emily had never been particularly religious – at least, not as far as she could remember – but, even so, the desecration made her feel uncomfortable.

When Honoré was sure they were alone, he lowered his weapon and waved Emily forward. 'Looks like they've gone out.' He used his gun to indicate the bedroll as Emily came closer. 'One, maybe two people at most. I think it's some kind of hideaway. They've got a box of provisions and a few items of cutlery, a small stove.' He stepped to one side. 'And look: they've formed a makeshift bunk out of some old pews. Well, the ones they haven't burned yet, anyway. I'd say we're just dealing with a couple of locals. Certainly no monsters to worry about.'

'For a hideaway, it's not very well hidden.' Emily wasn't convinced. 'And what about the bodies outside? You can't tell me they're nothing to worry about.'

'Hmmm. Something about that just doesn't read right to me. I wonder if they've been strung up there as a deterrent. A way of feeding

the rumours and ensuring people stay away. It certainly made us think twice.'

'But Honoré, *someone* must have killed those people. And the way they'd been hacked to pieces like that...' Her face was a grimace of disgust.

'Well, I've got my gun. And like you said, we've nothing better to be doing at the moment. At least we're relatively safe in here, for a while. I reckon we sit it out and wait for the occupiers to return. Then we might get some answers.'

Emily shrugged. They certainly needed answers, but she wasn't entirely certain yet what the questions were. Honoré was right, though – there was nothing else they could do than sit it out and...

There was a sudden eruption of light; an intense, electric blue that seemed to energise the air all around them. Honoré was knocked back off his feet, his gun skittering away across the marble floor. Emily grabbed a pillar for support, shielding her eyes against the glare. The light seemed to dance over the walls and floor, arcing like lightning over the nearby pews. At the epicentre, there was a bright, flickering ball of energy, hovering in the air. A moment later it began to coalesce into the form of a person. Emily was transfixed. The blue light was very familiar...

A woman stepped forward, and then the light was gone again, leaving only the flickering flames of the campfire to see by. In the dancing shadows it was hard to make out details, but the newcomer appeared to be dressed in only a black vest and black combat trousers. Her hair was a spill of intense raven locks that framed her face and cascaded down her neck and shoulders. But what was most startling about her, the thing that immediately grabbed the attention of both Honoré and Emily, was the fact that her body was covered in scars. Every inch of her exposed flesh, from her face to her hands, all down her arms and around her throat, was covered in horrific runic symbols that had been carved into her skin.

'It's her,' Honoré said breathlessly, retrieving his gun. And Emily knew it was, knew that the cuts were deep, deep enough to have etched the woman's bones. Deep enough to have damaged her in ways that were more than just physical. She could feel the hurt, and her heart went out to the slight figure in the tough-looking attire, wondering who or what could torture another being in this way.

After a moment of disorientation, the woman noticed them there, first Emily, then Honoré coming towards them with his gun in his hand. She smiled on seeing Honoré, but her gaze flickered back to Emily with a brief frown.

'I knew you'd come,' she said.

The man in the purple robes looked directly at Dr Smith.

'You make an interesting argument, Dr Smith,' he purred, watching him intently. 'Only, listening to your exchange over the surveillance system, I thought it might be starting to sound a little *too* convincing.' He turned to the High Executioner and smiled. 'Perhaps it would be best if I continued this interview myself, at a later date?'

The woman looked thoughtful. 'As you suggest, Grand Master.'

Dr Smith leaned in towards her. 'Hmph! Just as I thought. Jumped-up people with trumped-up titles. People like this,' he waved his hand dismissively at the Grand Master, 'will make you feel as if you don't have any options. I'm here to assure you, you do. Think about it.'

At this, the Grand Master motioned the guards forward with his finger. They swarmed in around Dr Smith, politely, if forcefully, taking him by the arms and manoeuvring him to his feet. He wriggled free of their grasp and smoothed himself down, slipping his packet of cigarettes neatly into his pocket. 'I'll go with you willingly; there's no need for force.'

The Grand Master nodded his consent to one of the acolytes. 'Dr Smith is to be treated as a guest. Anything he wants – within reason – grant it.' He turned to the stranger. 'You understand, of course, that these courtesies will be extended to you only while you *behave* like a guest in our house. Any attempt to leave your generous chambers, or, indeed, to make contact with any member of the Ruling Council without an invitation, will lead to the immediate withdrawal of your privileges. I am sure you know what I mean.'

Dr Smith smiled. 'Naturally.'

'Good. In that case, go.' He stood aside, and Dr Smith allowed himself to be led out by two of the guards, with another two following behind. 'Oh, and Dr Smith?' They stopped briefly in the doorway. 'I look forward to our conversation.'

The five men filed out of the room.

The Grand Master turned his attention to the High Executioner, who was still seated by the table, rifling through the papers she had spread out earlier. 'I believe you have a job to do. In three days, the summoning will be upon us, and I need your reassurance that all outstanding *issues* will be taken care of. I trust that is clear?'

'I hope you're not questioning me.'

The Grand Master looked momentarily uncomfortable. 'Not at all, but everything must be in place.'

'I know my duties.' The High Executioner looked up, her gaze as cold as steel. 'Do you know yours?'

The Grand Master made a show of smiling back, but he was obviously unsettled. 'Of course. I've assigned you a guard detail until the ceremony. That way, we can be sure you've got enough people on hand to help. And it also means that if Dr Smith continues to attempt to spread his dissent amongst the members of the Ruling Council, you've got people close by to remind you of your duties.' He smiled again, this time a dark, forbidding smile. 'I'll expect a situation report tomorrow at noon.' He didn't wait for an answer, but instead turned on his heel and headed for the door, the hem of his robe trailing across the floor behind him and leaving her with the distinct impression that he was gliding.

Just as he reached the door, she spoke again to his back: 'Grand Master, I trust you do not forget who here is the Executioner.'

His step faltered only slightly as he swept from the room.

When he had gone, the Executioner turned to the three acolytes who'd remained in the room beside her, and sighed. 'Well, boys, aren't we in for some fun.'

‘Twentieth Century eh? Now there’s a turn up for the books.’ The woman reached for Honoré’s hand, holding it just a fraction too long for Emily’s liking. Then she turned to Emily, but spoke to Honoré. ‘How come you’re with her?’

Emily frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

The woman met her gaze. ‘Are you here to try to take me in?’

‘What?’

A look of confusion came over the woman’s face. ‘Who *are* you?’

Emily remained steadfast, although she was starting to feel distinctly uncomfortable about the way the woman was reacting to her. ‘Emily Blandish. And you?’

‘You can call me Maria.’ She turned back to Honoré. ‘Are you all right? Has she done anything to you?’

Honoré shook his head. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

Maria smiled. ‘Let’s start again.’ She took a step towards Emily. ‘Tell me what you’re doing here.’ She spoke with a quaint, almost childish foreign lilt that Emily couldn’t quite place, although her dark colouring suggested a Mediterranean origin.

Honoré moved around to stand beside Emily. ‘I’m Honoré Lechasseur. We’re here to help. We’re stranded here in this time and we’re trying to find some answers.’

‘And you think you can find your answers in here?’ Maria looked incredulous.

‘We heard there were monsters in here. We came to find out what was going on.’

Emily decided to chip in at this point. ‘We didn’t think much of your welcoming committee.’ She gestured back towards the entranceway and the corpses swinging gently on their ropes outside.

Maria laughed. ‘They’re not mine. I keep them there to discourage unwelcome visitors.’ She looked pointedly at the two of them. ‘They’ve



been there since before I moved in.’ She paced around the fire, warming her hands. ‘So let me get this straight. You two are nothing to do with the Sodality. You’re not agents sent to kill me or bring me in, and you,’ she motioned at Honoré, ‘are not being held under duress and forced to help her,’ this time Emily, ‘to move around from one time and place to another.’

Honoré gave her his most earnest look. ‘No.’

‘Then come and get warm by the fire and let’s get to the bottom of what you’re really doing here.’

‘So, this Sodality – you think they’re trying to kill you?’ asked Honoré. The three of them were crouched around the campfire now, a little more at ease in each other’s company. Maria was brewing a pot of tea. She still seemed nervous of Emily, though, and kept stealing glances at her, as if wary that she might prove to be untrustworthy. Honoré wondered if it had something to do with Emily’s absent timesnake; he sensed that Maria had been quick enough to read his own – as quick as he’d been to spot that hers was the same as that of the skeleton he’d examined in the morgue.

‘I *know* they’re out to kill me,’ the woman replied. ‘That’s why I’m hiding here. They’re worried their *experiment* is going to cause them too many problems.’

‘Experiment?’ Emily asked, quizzically.

Maria indicated her scars. ‘They... did something to me. Back in Venice, when I was a girl. They abducted me, told me I had *special powers*, then did this to me. Months and months of torture. I’m not sure how exactly it affected me, but I can’t seem to control it now.’

‘What do you mean?’ Honoré was appalled. ‘Control what?’

‘I’m like you. I can see time. I mean, *really* see it. I can watch the ebb and flow of history; see how people leave impressions behind them in their wake. Well, most of the time.’ She glanced at Emily. ‘But ever since they cut me with these runes, I’ve been able to step into it too, to move about through time like it’s a river I can swim through.’ She paused.

‘It usually takes two of you, doesn’t it? A time channeller and a time sensitive, working together.’ She smiled at Honoré. ‘But I can do it by myself. I just don’t have any control over when and where it happens.’

Emily looked shocked. ‘So you just shift through time at random? How do you get home?’

‘It’s not that simple. I’m tied to two time periods: this godforsaken ruined future and 16<sup>th</sup> Century Venice, where I was born. That’s how I got away from them, the Sodality. I phased right out of my bed in the cells and ended up here. I’ve no idea why. Had a brief run-in with one of those gargoyle things, but managed to get away. It’s taken me years to adjust. Years of avoiding capture, trusting no-one. It’s getting harder now, though. Their agents are hunting me through Venice. They’re pretty active in that time period. Something big is about to happen there.’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know.’ The kettle was boiling on the stove with a shrill whistle. Maria lifted it off the heat and began pouring the steaming water into a teapot. ‘But it might be related in some way to how the world ends up looking like this.’ She’d finished with the kettle and was rubbing her arms, as if cold. ‘Or it might not. It’s hard to tell.’

Honoré caught Emily’s eye. Finally, they seemed to be getting somewhere in this twisted version of the future. He accepted the warm mug of tea that Maria handed to him. It was black, and weak, but he was thankful for the draught nevertheless. ‘Tell me more about this Sodality then, Maria,’ he said.

She raised an eyebrow. ‘They’re a cult of magicians. They started out as a band of Vict...’

There was a sudden rush of air. The fire guttered and spat. Maria’s mug hit the marble floor, spilling its contents everywhere. Wisps of blue electrical energy danced over the ground all around the woman, then she abruptly vanished.

Emily sat dumbfounded, staring at the space where Maria had been. ‘She’s phased back to Venice.’ she said.

‘Incredible,’ muttered Honoré.

‘What do we do?’

‘We wait until she phases back here again.’

Emily picked up her tea. ‘I suppose we could be here for a while,’ she said, downing a mouthful of the bitter liquid.

Honoré woke with a start. An unfamiliar face was hovering in his field of vision, smiling. A woman – a pretty woman. He blinked himself awake. Then the world seemed to suddenly rush in on him and reality blossomed with a cold realisation. He recognised the scars on the woman's face. Maria! He sat up, angry with himself that he had missed her arrival.

'I...' She stopped him short, pressing a finger to his lips.

'Shhh.' Grabbing his hand, she pulled him unceremoniously to his feet and led him away from the campfire, which was starting to burn low. 'Come with me.' He noticed she kept hold of his hand as she walked him through the transept and into the north quire. Once there, she let go of his hand and turned to face him.

'Where have you been?' he asked.

'Venice. I've been gone for three days.'

Honoré checked his watch. He wrinkled his forehead. 'According to my watch, it's been only about two and a half hours.'

'But time is relative, Honoré, you should know that. I could have been in Venice for a year and still returned here only five minutes after I left.' She smiled. 'Anyway, I wanted to get you on your own for a while so we could talk freely about your friend.' She lifted her eyes from his face for a moment and glanced back towards Emily, who was still asleep beside the fire. 'Who is she? Is she Sodality?'

Honoré shrugged. 'To be truthful, I don't know who she is. She kind of fell into my life a couple of years back. She doesn't really know who she is, either, or what her life was like before she arrived in London in 1949. But I know she's not mixed up in this Sodality stuff. She's a good person. I've got to know her, as best I can. She lives for the moment.' He glanced back at Emily's resting form. When he spoke again, it was as much to himself as to Maria. 'In truth, I'm not sure how I'd cope without her. We're a good team.' He searched Maria's face, trying to read

her intentions.

‘It’s just, when I *look* at her, I see emptiness – like she’s got no history of her own. And usually that means only one thing...’

Honoré’s nodded. ‘Me too. It’s connected to her amnesia. Like I said, she lives for the moment. But she is nothing to do with this Sodality, of that I’m sure.’

Maria nodded. ‘I’ll take your word for it. You don’t seem like the typical sort of Sodality lackey anyway.’

‘I guess I should take that as a compliment.’

He watched Maria as she wandered back towards the campfire once again. He could feel the adrenalin pumping through his veins. Another time sensitive! Someone who seemed to know a lot more about what was going on than either he or Emily. Someone who might finally be able to help Emily find out more about her past. He moved after her, intent on getting some answers before she disappeared again.

Emily woke to the clatter of pans. She sat up, and was startled to see that not only had Maria returned, but Honoré was now apparently helping her make breakfast by splitting open packets of vacuum-packed food and handing them to her to cook over the fire. It was obvious they’d stoked the fire, too; where there had been only dying embers an hour ago, there were now bright flames licking vigorously at the remains of another pew.

‘Why didn’t you wake me?’

Honoré looked up from another pack of food. ‘We thought we’d let you rest. How are you feeling?’

‘Groggy. I’m still a little tired from all that rushing about through the sewers.’

Maria placed another pan on the makeshift stove and sat back, regarding Emily. ‘Sewers?’

‘Oh, yes. Sorry. When we first arrived, we were attacked by one of those gargoyle creatures, and some soldiers came to our rescue. We followed them through the sewers back to their base, but we weren’t

made particularly welcome.'

'Houses of Parliament?'

'You know those guys?' Honoré asked.

'Not really. I've traded with them a few times. I bring stuff back from Venice, sometimes. They don't like me much, freakish as I am, but it's not enough to put them off a packet of fresh meat or cheese. They don't know where I live, though. I meet them in secret locations around the city, and I'm always careful never to be seen coming or going from here.'

'What do you get out of it?'

'Radiation drugs, mostly. The occasional round of ammo, just to keep my supplies up.' She sniffed. 'Honoré, could you pass me those plates from back there?' He reached over to where she was pointing and pulled them down from one of the pews. They were dusty and covered in grime. 'Don't worry, I'll give them a wipe. I don't normally get visitors, so I'm not really prepared for this kind of thing.'

Emily was more awake now. She sat up, straightening her coverall, which was still irritating her. 'Is there anything I can do to help?'

'With breakfast? No, it's all under control.'

'Okay.' She hesitated. 'So, if I remember correctly, you were about to tell us about the Sodality. Before you phased out of existence, I mean.'

Maria pulled a face, as if disconcerted by the question. Emily quickly continued. 'Sorry if that was a little too forward. It's just – I'm trying to work out what's going on out there, and whether or not it has any relevance to what's happened to me.'

'Your amnesia? Honoré told me about that.'

Emily shot Honoré a stern glance. There were too many undercurrents here, and she still wasn't sure about this woman. 'Yes, exactly that.'

'Well, I'm not sure it's going to help you much, but you should know. You're bound to be targets too, given your abilities.' She curled back on a cushion, leaving the frying food to spit and hiss in the pans. 'It started in Victorian London. A group of Devil worshippers who called themselves the Cabal of the Horned Beast.' She stopped when she saw the look on Emily's face. 'What is it?'

‘The Cabal of the Horned Beast. Oh my God, Honoré!’

Maria glanced over at Honoré, waiting for an explanation.

‘We ran into them once,’ he said, his voice low.<sup>3</sup> ‘Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. We were trying to help out a friend. It got very messy.’

‘Then you’ll know what sort of people they were,’ Maria continued. ‘The Cabal was harmless at first, an excuse for middle-aged men to prance around in costumes and deflower virgins, all in the name of some grand scheme; the betterment of mankind. Only, somewhere down the line, some of them began taking it seriously. They started believing their own rhetoric. Their ambition grew, and they became fascinated by the arcane. Somehow, one of their number got hold of an ancient book, a tract of some kind. The work of the Devil, supposedly.’ She was in full flow now, and Honoré and Emily were both enraptured. ‘Their legends say that it was stolen away from them in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century by an evil stranger who wormed his way into their ranks, became their first Grand Master and then betrayed them. They’d already deciphered enough, though, to know that it held secrets of great power.

‘Anyway, they spent the next five hundred years or so searching for that book, generation after generation of them, and eventually they found it again. They began learning its secrets and dabbling with psionic science, remaking themselves as the Sodality. Most importantly, they discovered how to open gateways in time, through which they could travel back to certain psionic nexus points throughout history. Then they flooded those nexus points with their agents and acolytes, setting up bases there.’ She paused, visibly choked. ‘One of those nexus points is Renaissance Venice, 1586, where I was born. They took me, and many others like me – adults, children, babies – even pregnant women – and started to experiment on us, subjecting us to bizarre hermetic tortures, trying to gain full mastery over time, so that they wouldn’t be restricted to just the nexus points. Eventually, through a combination of conventional and psionic science, they found out how to do it. They went far back in history and somehow changed the course of human

development, so that it led to the birth of time channellers and time sensitives: the keys that enabled them to move freely through time and space.’ She let that sink in for a moment, then continued. ‘There was no stopping them after that. They went back to their origins in Victorian London and infiltrated the Cabal, giving them greater wealth and influence, arranging things so that the once-harmless cult developed into the dominant power it is now. The only thing they can’t do is to see their own futures... though I know they’ve tried. Something stops them doing that. But anyway, many of their scriptures and beliefs became self-fulfilling prophecies – they altered their own history to ensure their dominance. And then, not satisfied with what they had, they began reshaping the world to their own design.’

Emily was trying to take it all in. ‘So how did things end up like this? Was there a war?’

Maria shook her head. ‘A little power in the wrong hands... They destroyed history. Too many changes wrought too quickly. Too much twisting of events, toying with causality. They went too far, played too fast-and-loose with history. They created feedback loops, paradoxes everywhere. Human history become a honeycomb. In the end, it just imploded.’

It was Honoré’s turn to ask a question. ‘Let me get this straight. The Sodality went far back in history, to one of these nexus points, and tampered with human development so that time channellers and time sensitives – people like Emily and me – would one day be born? So that they could use us?’ Maria nodded in confirmation. ‘So, what are they up to now? Why are they trying to hunt us down and kill us?’

‘I’m not sure,’ admitted Maria. ‘Something’s changed. I think they might be trying to undo what they’ve done, so they can restore the world to how it should be, or at least how they *think* it should be. Instead of trying to capture us and use our abilities, like they did before, now they seem to be trying to wipe us out, one by one. Different factions within the organisation pull in different directions. At its heart, the Sodality is still a cult of Devil worshippers, and it wouldn’t surprise me if the



pseudo-religious faction is gaining the upper hand again. They've already created a hell on Earth. The only thing that's missing is the Devil.'

'How do you know all this?' asked Emily. The scent of the cooking food was starting to make her stomach growl.

'I spent years in cells and recovery rooms while they were experimenting on me. Even the most conscientious of guards took pity on me when they became bored. They taught me English and told me stories, about the future and the past. Eventually I was able to piece together the jigsaw and work out what was going on. Since then, I've made it my business to keep tabs on them. It's the only way to survive.'

Honoré whistled. 'That's quite a story.'

'It has to be related to what's happened to me!' Emily's face was flushed with excitement. 'Perhaps I'm one of their experiments too?' She shivered at the thought. 'Or perhaps they're the ones who took my memory away?'

She took a plate from Maria. It was the closest they'd come to real food for at least a day, and although she wasn't sure what the meat was, it smelled a lot more appetising than the stew they'd eaten back at the soldiers' mess.

Honoré spoke around a mouthful of the chewy meat. 'So, what next?'

Maria poked at the fire, her olive eyes glittering in the flickering light. 'Keep on living. That's all we can do.'

Emily dropped her fork onto her plate with a clatter. 'We can do more than that. We can try to put things right.'

Maria shook her head. She wouldn't meet Emily's eyes. 'It's too little, too late. The Sodality are like a massive grinding machine. They hold dominion over the nexus points in history. They're an immovable object; we'd just bang against it to no avail.'

Honoré didn't agree. 'Maria. You're wrong. It's never too late. We start small. We start by trying to find out what those bastards did to you, to help you get control of your powers. Then we work out what their weak spot is and exploit it. We can make a difference.'

Emily was frowning. 'Where have I heard that before?'

Honoré shrugged. ‘It doesn’t matter. Right now, we need to work out the best course of action. There’s nothing more Emily and I can do here, in this broken future. We need to nip this in the bud early on, before it gets this far. And we can’t go anywhere without you...’

‘What do you mean?’

Honoré looked uncomfortable. ‘Umm. It’s just that, you’re the only person we’ve met with any *history*. The closest we’ve come before now was a medic, back at the Houses of Parliament, but following his timesnake would get us back only about 60 years. If we’re going to make a difference, we need to go back a lot further than that.’

‘How did you end up here in the first place, then, so far out of your own time zone?’

‘It’s a long story, best saved for another day.’

Emily wondered if he’d eventually tell Maria – that it was her history they’d followed to get to this place, that in 20<sup>th</sup> Century London, her bones had been found trapped underneath a collapsed building near Spitalfields market. How would she take it, knowing the circumstances of her own death? But then, how could she be dead in 1951 and yet alive now? It was just too bizarre to think about, and yet she had to, for she was more certain than ever that Maria was the key to her amnesia. So despite the fact that she still didn’t like the way the woman looked at Honoré – her Honoré – she knew she had to keep the peace, come what may.

Before Maria could ask further questions, she jumped in with one of her own. ‘So what do you suggest we do next, Honoré?’

‘I think we should try to accompany Maria back to Venice when she next has one of her phasing episodes.’ He pursed his lips. ‘That way, we can try to get to grips with what the Sodality are doing in that time period and see if we can do anything to stop them. At that point, we may be early enough to cause them a few problems.’

Maria was nervous. ‘I don’t know. It sounds risky to me. Like the beginning of the end.’

Emily looked her straight in the eye. ‘Perhaps that’s exactly what it is. But the end of what?’

The three of them sat together around the campfire, waiting. Honoré had already tried to look deep into Maria’s timeline, but to no avail. She wasn’t as closed a book to him as Emily was, by any means, but neither was she easy to decipher. Her timesnake was a twisted, complex thing that he couldn’t unravel. It warped and bifurcated, allowing him nothing but brief snapshots of her history. Her bones had shown a much clearer progression of her life. Perhaps, he mused, because at that point it had already ended.

When the time came, they were ready. The air around them filled with a charge of blue light. To Honoré, Maria looked beautiful, wrapped in a halo of energy, a web of prickling light. She blossomed, suddenly, her timeline opening up like a vortex, a clear path to navigate through hundreds of years. He grabbed for Emily’s hand, clutched it tightly and prayed that they weren’t heading straight into yet more danger.

# The Children of Venice

Venice 1586

## 1

Dawn was breaking as the three travellers arrived in Venice. The streets were alive with activity; people bustling on the jetties to buy passage on the boats and street traders haggling with patrons over trinkets and food. Birds wheeled high overhead, and below, the canals lapped at the sides of the walkways with a mesmerising rhythm. Tall buildings seemed to rise from the water like stone monoliths, but were dappled with windows and archways and little doors, balconies adorned with fresh flowers and smiling faces. It would have been almost idyllic if it hadn't been for the stench; the constant heat had caused the foetid water to fester, giving rise to a rotten, sulphuric reek that seemed to permeate the city.

Honoré, Emily and Maria found themselves standing on a bridge. Honoré, a little disorientated, grasped hold of the railing, trying to steady himself. He looked out over the canal, which stretched away from him in both directions. Boats – multitudes of gondolas – glided gracefully across the surface of the water, passengers sinking back into their heaps of perfumed cushions, enjoying the sun. The stink didn't seem to bother them in the slightest, whereas Honoré could quite easily have vomited his entire breakfast over the edge.

The richer Venetians were dressed in colourful finery, while in contrast the street vendors and peasants were attired mostly in rags. Emily and Maria looked only a little out of place in their black coveralls and combat trousers, but Honoré, dressed in his leather coat and hat, couldn't have been more conspicuous. Thankfully, the locals seemed entirely engrossed in their own business, and nobody paid them the

slightest bit of attention.

Maria put her hand on Honoré's shoulder. She looked radiant, as if the return to her own time period was enough to revitalise her, to endow her with strength. Either that, or seeing her in the daylight for the first time, he was struck by her strange, arcane beauty. He knew Emily didn't appreciate it quite as much as he did – and, to be fair, he could see her point – but he just couldn't help looking at her, seeing how the runes on her face seemed to glow and sparkle in the sunlight.

She grinned under his dazed scrutiny. 'Come on, we can't stay here. Someone might spot us. I've got somewhere we can go.'

She led them across the canal bridge and down onto a busy street. Dodging traders, who appeared to be setting up a small market, they wound their way through the crowd and out into a small square on the other side of the water. It was noisy and bustling with people. Children were chasing a small dog by a tree, teasing it with a piece of meat. It yapped loudly, running in circles, causing passers-by to smile and wave. The young girl, who must have been its keeper, finally gave in and dropped the meat to the ground. The dog busied itself grubbing around in the dust, while the other children clapped and cheered. The girl tried to wipe her hands clean on her dirty knees.

On the far side of the square, an old man was welcoming people into a chapel, herding them through the doorway like sheep, his wizened face friendly and warm. But Honoré was still feeling dizzy from the journey, and the putrid stench of the canal was making his head spin. He stumbled, missing his footing and trying desperately not to fall over. It was Emily who rushed to his side and caught hold of him, taking his weight, and he held onto her gratefully as Maria guided them into a small lane around the back of one of the houses. Here Emily was able to prop him up against the wall, and he could hear her gasping for breath at the exertion.

He closed his eyes while the world continued to spin all around him, with its gaudy harlequin colours. Someone was singing in the distance and he wished they'd stop, as the nausea was rising now, threatening to

take control. Through narrowed eyes, he saw Maria, scuffing her feet on the dusty flagstones and looking at him curiously.

‘Does it usually have this effect on him?’

‘Pretty much,’ Emily shrugged. ‘Me too. Although perhaps having you along made a difference this time. I feel fine.’

Definitely Emily. He smiled to himself, touched by her concern. ‘I’ll be fine in a moment. It’s just the *smell* of this place.’

‘What smell?’ Maria seemed genuinely puzzled. ‘Come on, if we each take an arm we’ll be much quicker.’ She heaved Honoré’s right arm up over her shoulder, and Emily took his left. ‘It’s not far.’

A few more corners and they were in a maze of narrow cobbled streets with open gutters running down the middle that did nothing to alleviate the smell. Maria moved like a cat navigating its territory, confidently finding her way through the warren and finally stopping outside a small building that nestled amongst a row of other, similar houses in an alley that was so narrow, the first storey overhanging windows on either side practically touched each other. As Honoré looked up, trying in vain to find the sky up there somewhere, he could see washing lines hung between the buildings, sheets draped across the gap like giant sails on delicate wooden spars. It was claustrophobically suffocating, the billowing laundry restricting what little breeze there was and trapping the canal stink securely between the buildings.

He leaned back against dirty plaster, fanning his face with his hat, and tried not to look down at the gutters. He had to admit that this was probably as safe as safe-houses could get, and he had no idea how he’d ever find his way back out to civilisation.

Maria produced a key from her combats and the old wooden door creaked alarmingly as it swung open. There was a scent of cinnamon and spices from within – anything to compete with the stench of the open sewers would be a blessing – and Honoré didn’t need inviting through into the cool dark interior. He exhaled noisily, realising he’d been holding his breath outside, and was about to take a lungful of hopefully cleaner air when it was knocked out of him completely as he

landed on his back on the stone flags. There was a small wiry man on top of him, attacking him, and he just didn't have the energy to fight.

'Roberto! Stop it! Leave him be!'

Honoré's assailant froze at Maria's voice and clambered off him sheepishly, but he wasn't backing down, even as he retreated into a corner fingering his moustache with one hand while warding the intruders off with the other.

Honoré's eyes adjusted to the gloom while he remained lying on the cool flagstones. He was in no hurry to get up – the air was definitely clearer down here. The room was tiny, over-furnished, with a table, a fireplace and a number of chairs. A small bookcase leaned up against one wall, and an old tapestry hung crookedly on another. The rug the others were standing on was good quality, but old; the once-deep colour had now faded to a washed-out red. Aside from the spicy scent, there was a musty odour that suggested the house was mostly unused, unlivid in. It was a bolt-hole, Maria's safe-house in a city teeming with millions of people and nobody to trust.

Honoré was lying on the only unoccupied bit of floor, and he pulled himself up to his feet, holding onto the edge of the table for support. Maria was still stood in the doorway to the street and his attacker was edging towards the other door that led deeper into the house. Honoré gave him a look and he raised his fists in retaliation, obviously prepared to defend his territory to the death.

Maria stepped between them, putting her hand on Honoré's chest. She looked him in the eye. 'Honoré. Roberto is an old friend of mine.'

The short, wiry man nodded enthusiastically at this, his dark hair bobbing with the gesture.

Honoré looked down at the hand splayed out on his chest. 'Then why did he attack me as soon as I stepped through the door?' He glared over her shoulder at the smaller man, who was blinking nervously as if someone were shining a bright light in his eyes.

Emily stepped in. 'Honoré? He was just defending his friend's house.'

Maria removed her hand, a fraction of a second before Honoré did it for her. ‘Actually, his motives were probably not as selfless as that,’ she said lightly. ‘More than likely he assumed you were the police.’ She turned to Roberto and smiled. ‘I’m right, aren’t I, Roberto? What have you been up to while I’ve been gone?’

Roberto was twitching again, uncomfortable. ‘It’s happening,’ he muttered, before clamping his lips closed once more.

‘Happening? What’s happening?’ asked Maria.

Roberto continued to peer warily at Honoré and Emily. Maria sighed. ‘Excuse me,’ she said, and steered her friend off through the archway and deeper into the house. Honoré and Emily looked at each other and then, in unison, smiled.

Emily spoke first: ‘So, that’s not too bad then for one day... We’ve found a body, travelled into the far future, met a woman who can’t exist, and then travelled with her back to Venice in the past... Wonder what we can get up to after lunch?’

Honoré wandered around the room, trailing one hand across the various pieces of furniture. These were antiques even in this time. He was worried about the future, about what was to come, but intrigued as to how this whole jigsaw puzzle fitted together. Then he looked at Emily, his Emily, back travelling with him again and as bright and enthusiastic as ever, and he knew he didn’t want to be anywhere else.

Maria returned carrying a tray with three cups of steaming liquid. Roberto followed, pulling on his cloak. He grinned at the pair of strangers, scooted over to the door, pulled it open and vanished out into the streets.

‘Tea,’ announced Maria. ‘To calm ourselves.’

‘Where’s he gone?’ asked Honoré, gesturing at the door.

‘Roberto has gone on an errand for me,’ said Maria. ‘Seems that since I was last here, events have escalated, and now the talk is all of a masked ball taking place soon. Roberto has gone to see what he can discover from his... contacts... about what is happening, where and when. He may be a little simple, but he’s loyal and has a network of informants to



rival that of the King.’

‘What was all that about when we arrived?’ asked Emily, sitting down beside Maria and taking a cup.

‘Oh, he’s jumpy. He’s always been jumpy.’ Maria took a sip of tea. ‘He’s a thief you see, and his first instinct is to flee, and his second to attack... When you entered the room, there was nowhere to flee...’

‘... so he attacked,’ finished Emily with a smile. ‘Good thing it was you, Honoré... Someone could have been hurt.’

Honoré shot Emily a look and pursed his lips.

‘Sit down, Honoré. Have some tea. I’m only joking.’

He sat facing them. ‘How long do we wait?’ he asked.

Maria made more tea, not sure what else to do. Had it been a mistake bringing Honoré and the girl back here? She still wasn’t convinced that the girl – Emily? – wasn’t one of the Sodality’s agents; and if she was, then Maria had probably just invited death into her home. If you could call this place a home. She could barely remember her first home, or her parents; she could just picture a low, whitewashed farmhouse, with olive trees outside and goats grazing beneath them, but her parents were shadowy, faceless figures, and she didn’t even know if they were still alive. She’d come across this little place by accident – the mother of one of the guards who’d befriended her had lived here and taken her in when she’d escaped. It had cost him his life.

But the visitors were the first people she’d talked to – really talked to – in such a long time. It couldn’t be wrong to want company, could it? She was lonely. And if they really could stop the Sodality, then perhaps some of it was worthwhile.

She took the tea back into the tiny front room. Emily and Honoré were deep in conversation and stopped as she entered. She wondered if they’d ever trust her enough to tell her everything.

Placing the tray on the table, she busied herself with clearing away the used cups, then stopped, hearing footsteps outside. The front door opened, and Roberto came in, hustling another man ahead of him. The

newcomer was dressed somewhat more expensively than Roberto and carried himself in the manner of someone used to doing business with strangers.

Honoré and Emily both stood up nervously as the pair entered. Maria saw their discomfort and smiled. 'It's all right – this is Marco, one of Roberto's contacts.'

She walked to Marco and greeted him, kissing him on both cheeks. 'Welcome, Marco, and thank you for coming at such short notice.'

Marco smiled at her. 'Maria. You are as lovely as ever.' He gently brushed her cheek with his fingertips. 'Despite what those devils did to you.' He strode across the room. 'And these are your new friends? Greetings to you as well.' He shook Honoré's hand firmly, and bowed briefly to Emily.

'What news do you have, Marco?' asked Maria. 'I fear time may be short.'

Marco frowned. 'Indeed, my dear. Only yesterday, I received a commission from the Comte Di Meglio. A lucrative proposition, but only if I could deliver on time...'

As he spoke, Maria leaned across to Honoré and whispered that Marco ran a tailor's shop in the city and specialised in the making of masks and costumes for the frequent balls that were held by the city's gentry.

'... one hundred masks, of the finest silk. But the strangest thing...' Marco leaned forward conspiratorially. 'They are all to be devil masks... evil visages... nothing fanciful or beauteous. All in dark colours: royal blues, scarlets and blacks... and with inlaid bone... Certainly not like the normal requests that I receive.'

'When are these to be delivered?' asked Honoré.

'Tomorrow night. No later. I have my boys working on them as we speak, creating these works of horror for the ball to end all balls.' Marco sniffed. 'They say... they say that this masque will be patronised by some very special visitors... the highest of the high... the Grand Master and the Chancellor of the Sodality themselves!'

At mention of the Sodality, both Honoré and Emily stiffened, and Maria sensed the change in the atmosphere.

‘What more do you know, Marco?’

Marco strode around the room, apparently oblivious to the effect his words were having. Roberto was cowering in the background, his weasel eyes flicking between Honoré, Emily and Maria as Marco spoke.

‘Well... there are the children...’

‘What about the children?’

Marco seemed to be relishing every moment – it was obvious he considered himself something of a raconteur. ‘The ones like you, my dear... The ones they take from the streets, because they are special...’

‘Special?’ Emily could not help but echo the word. ‘What do you mean, *special*?’

‘Ah, my dear, special in that they can make things happen. Why, only last week one of my boys saw a group of ragamuffins chase after one of these *special* children. He reported that after only a few paces, the pursuers became confused, lost sight of their quarry – though he was standing in plain view of them, looking at them with a quizzical smile on his face – and began to squabble among themselves about something nonsensical. At which, the child turned and walked away seemingly without a care in the world.’

‘It’s true,’ confirmed Maria. ‘When I was first taken and held, the cells were full of these kids, some as young as eight or nine, all taken from the streets after they were seen or reported to be able to work miracles with their minds. Most were kept subdued by drugs mixed in with their broth, but occasionally I saw something extraordinary happen.’

There’d been one time, she recalled, when she’d been taken back to her cell after a session with one of the experimenters and she’d seen a boy, maybe 12 years old, walking out from one of the other rooms with a calm expression on his face. From inside the room there had come the sound of weeping, and as she had passed by, she had glanced in, and seen – *something* – on the floor. A pile of quivering flesh and protruding bone. And it had had *eyes*, and a small mouth inset in the flesh... She’d

caught the gaze of the boy and – the way he'd *looked* at her... She'd known instantly. He'd done it. He'd been pushed so far that his mind had snapped and he'd exacted a form of revenge that she'd never thought possible... She'd often wondered what had become of him – and of what was left of his tormentor.

She realised that she was shaking. The memories were as red raw as they had always been. Why couldn't she forget, the way she'd forgotten her early childhood? God knew, she'd tried for long enough.

Emily was speaking, a dawning realisation in her voice. 'The children... Honoré, do you remember the children?'<sup>1</sup>

Honoré nodded. 'We may have met some of these children before, Maria. If they are the same, they are very special indeed, and I can see why this Sodality would want to keep them under control.'

'Where were you held?' asked Emily.

'At the Palazzo Bembo. There is a labyrinth of holding cells and rooms underneath, dug deep into the rock.'

Honoré stroked his beard thoughtfully. 'We need to get into this masque,' he said. 'It's probably the only way to find out for sure what's happening here. Marco, do you know where it's taking place?'

Marco shook his head. 'No, I have simply been asked to have the devil masks ready by tomorrow night. Someone will be sent to collect them.'

Honoré nodded slowly. 'Then, my friend, I think I know just the people to undertake that delivery for you.'

Darkness fell. Maria had suddenly phased out again, leaving them alone, and Roberto had also gone, back to whatever schemes and plans he was working on. There was a palpable sense of gloom hanging over them all, and the house seemed to be closing in on them.

Emily found her thoughts increasingly drawn to the children, and she remembered the feelings that she had experienced when she had met them before. There was something in her mind, something tugging

at her lost memory, that she could not bring to the fore. Like a tongue seeking out a recently missing tooth, she worried at it as she moved around the small room, lighting candles with a taper. When she was done, she blew out the taper, watching as threads of smoke ascended from it, twisting in the air. Emily thought this must be something like what Honoré saw when people's timesnakes unfurled before him... a twisting panoply of life events that, with her help, he could step into and explore. She had once thought them unique, alone in the universe in their abilities... but then they had met others who could likewise step through time – others like Radford and Barnaby, like Simon battling the Fendahl at the time of the Crusades – and realised that they were not alone. Now it was becoming clear that this was all part of a bigger picture, that something was manipulating humanity to an unknown end. And here and now they were walking along the path that might lead them to discover what was behind it all... what was locked in her lost memories and past.

A loud female scream shattered the evening air. Honoré was on his feet in an instant and opening the door, Emily behind him. Outside, they skidded to a halt in the middle of the alley. The stench assailed them and they both grimaced and lifted their hands to cover their noses at the same time. Looking down the narrow alley, they saw something moving a short distance away, at a junction where the alley intersected with a wider street. They moved swiftly towards the intersection, where there was more light, and suddenly, silhouetted in full view against a shop front was one of the terrifying gargoyle creatures they had seen in the future. It made a stone-against-stone grating sound as it moved, and Emily saw that it was stalking a well-dressed middle-aged woman who had fallen in the street. She was babbling and moaning in fear as the creature slowly approached her.

Honoré looked around, seeking something to use as a weapon, but saw nothing that might be of any help. Emily tried to hold onto his arm, but he shook her off.

‘When I move, you go to the woman... make sure she gets away...’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘This...’

He strode forward towards the creature and bellowed at the top of his voice: ‘Here! I’m here!’

The creature stopped its advance and slowly turned its head so that the pinprick red eyes were looking balefully at him.

He stepped backwards, and Emily moved away from him into the shadow of one of the doorways.

‘Come on then! What’re you waiting for?’

He took another step backwards as the gargoyle creature turned its body towards him and started moving tentatively in his direction.

Grinning at Emily, Honoré turned and ran off down the narrow street, his leather coat flapping around his legs. After a moment’s pause, the creature set off after him, a heavy stone cat in hot pursuit of a rather large mouse. Its feet raised sparks on the stones as it passed, way too close to Emily for comfort, and even when it was no longer in sight she could still hear it clattering off into the night.

She hurried over to the junction where the woman was lying, muttering to herself and crying. Emily tried to help her to her feet, but the woman pushed her away and dragged herself back towards the wall of a nearby house. Her eyes fixed on Emily, and she seemed to calm down slightly as the younger woman crouched beside her and gently brushed stray hairs from her forehead, making quiet, soothing noises. She clutched Emily’s arm and whispered in a halting voice: ‘They’re fools, fools! I’ve said so all along. They can send their creatures to hunt me down, kill me, but it will do them no good. I have given them years of loyal service, and they know I speak the truth.’ She glanced round furtively before continuing. Emily leaned closer, realising that this could be important. ‘Mark my words, the Devil will not be satisfied with their paltry achievements; the flawed products of work yet to be completed. They should have waited! The Child of Time... the Child of Time is our only hope...’

‘Child of Time’. It was as if an explosion suddenly detonated in Emily’s mind. She reeled back, images and flashes of light filling her brain. *Death and horror*. There was a child being tortured, skin being scarred with burning hot brands – she could feel flesh shrivelling from bone, blackening, and it was all she could do to stop herself crying out in shared pain. Then there was a group of hooded men standing silently in a circle, incense fumes and chanting filling the air. And an icy pleasure suffused her entire being as a city burned before her eyes. She blinked and the sensory assault faded, leaving her gasping for breath.

‘Who is this Child?’ breathed Emily. She had to know.

The woman shuddered and moaned. ‘She is the culmination. An innocent, unaware of her true power over time. She must come soon, soon...’

‘That gargoyle creature, what was it? Why was it after you?’

A look of deep suspicion suddenly clouded the woman’s face. ‘Who are you? Why are you asking me all these questions?’

‘I’m sorry, it’s just...’

The woman was recovering her wits now that the initial shock of the attack was passing, and Emily realised that she had been too insistent with her questioning.

‘Get away from me,’ the woman said, pushing Emily firmly backwards and scrabbling to her feet.

‘Please...’ Emily implored.

‘I’ve already said too much,’ the woman muttered, then turned tail and scurried away down the narrow alleyway. Emily briefly considered giving chase, but thought better of it. She wasn’t going to learn any more like that.

Suddenly she felt a hand grasp her shoulder from behind. She span round in alarm, then gave a sigh of relief.

‘Honoré!’

‘Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you.’

‘Where did that stone thing go? How did you get away?’

‘Let’s just say that I led it a merry dance through the streets of Venice... until we crossed a bridge that was not quite strong enough to take its weight. I expect it’s wading around underwater now, looking for a way back to the surface. What happened to that woman?’

Emily told Honoré what had happened, and what the woman had said.

Honoré looked thoughtful and stroked his beard gently. ‘So... a Child of Time. Unaware of her true power, coming soon to help the Sodality... in some sort of bargain with the Devil.’ He shivered involuntarily.

‘Do you think it’s one of the children?’ asked Emily.

‘No idea, but it’s possible.’

‘Do you think it’s me?’ There. She’d said it.

‘I don’t know. What do you think?’

She could tell from the tone of his voice that the same thought had already occurred to him. ‘I don’t know either,’ she replied, ‘but it could be... It feels... feels like something I should remember. When she first said it, I saw... things... random events, destruction, death... like a memory in some ways, but different in others. It could be connected.’

Honoré nodded. ‘Seems that this time it’s all connected... You, me, Maria, the Sodality... Something is coming to a head, and we’re all involved.’

It was time. Honoré stood and shrugged on his leather greatcoat, preparing for his late night rendezvous at Marco’s shop. Roberto had arrived back at the house to show him the way, but Maria had not yet returned. Honoré hoped she was all right, but knew that she could look after herself.

There was trouble afoot, that was certain. Marco had mentioned that the leaders of the Sodality would be at this masque, and the only way that could happen would be if they travelled through time to get there... and that meant that Maria was not the only one of their experiments that had worked. Was Emily another of their missing wards? Had she escaped from some terrible future only to find herself walking straight



back into danger again because of the decisions they were taking? Was she really this Child of Time – whoever and whatever that was?

He noticed that Emily was hesitating. ‘You coming?’ he asked her, holding out his hand. ‘We can do this together.’ He sensed that was important, somehow – to be doing it together.

But Emily made no move to take his hand, and searched his eyes with her own. ‘I’m not sure I can.’

Honoré frowned. ‘We’re just going to make the delivery for Marco, find out where this ball is taking place tomorrow, and... borrow... a couple of masks so we can be there when all the fun starts.’

‘You don’t understand.’ Emily shook her head. ‘I can’t be there. I have to try to help the children, Honoré. Remember when we met them before, I had this compulsion to protect them, to help them, as if I was one of them too... ? Well, that feeling is back, and stronger than ever. I need to go to the Palazzo to see what I can do there. Maybe I can rescue some of them, protect them from more experiments by the Sodality... but I have to do *something*. I can’t just sit back and let it happen. You do understand?’

Honoré looked at Emily. He understood only too well. Emily had had some sort of affinity with those special children that he hadn’t been able to figure out, and until she worked through it, she would not be there for him. A part of her was attuned to them somehow. Maybe they were even calling out to her, as they had before.

He nodded. ‘I understand. You be careful.’

‘Yes, of course I will. I’ll head up to the Palazzo and see what I can find out, while you and Roberto do the same for the masque. We can meet up back here afterwards and compare notes.’

‘Right.’ Honoré gave her a quick hug and looked around for Roberto, who was, as usual, hiding in the shadows. So it was up to him, then. He didn’t like being without Emily – it felt like a part of him was missing – but she knew she had to go, that she had to find out whatever there was to be found out.

Emily watched as Honoré and Roberto headed off into the night. She knew that she had to do this; it was a siren call to her... And then there was the mysterious Child of Time... Was that really her? Maybe the children could shed some light on that as well. She picked up one of the cloaks by the door and set off, walking in the opposite direction from her friends, keeping half an eye out for any more of those gargoyle creatures as she went. She had no wish to meet with one of those. Not now. Not never.

The Palazzo was surprisingly easy to find, though she wasn't sure that she'd be able to retrace her steps back to the house again, now that she'd left the maze of narrow streets and entered a wide, open piazza. It had started to rain and the water was washing the day's debris down the gutters; she had to watch her step in the twilight to avoid treading in Venice's waste. Sometimes she longed for 20<sup>th</sup> Century advancements like streetlights and sewers.

At the end of the piazza, a wider street led gently uphill, the cobbles neater and the runoff directed to either side rather than straight down the middle of the road. The further she went, the more the area improved, until she rounded a neat stone building to find herself in the shadow of the Palazzo, its imposing round towers rising before her to pierce the clouds above. There were lights in some of the windows, but the grounds seemed empty and the main gates were invitingly open.

She made her way around the base of the building, keeping an eye open for any guards and hoping she could soon find a less conspicuous way in. Surely these places had entrances other than the main one... or did they build them like fortresses with only one way in and out? But this place didn't look built for defence – far more for comfort, with elegant statuary and ornate carvings in the walls. There must be a servants' entrance, she reasoned, so that the staff and the nobles didn't have to see each other or accidentally meet.

Her feet crunched on gravel and she peered into the damp gloom as a dark shape loomed in front of her. Edging closer, she saw it was an entrance of sorts: a short flight of hewn steps leading down into pitch darkness. At least she'd be out of the rain.

Emily stepped down into darkness and held one arm in front of her to feel her way. Almost immediately her fingers brushed wood, and she knew there was a door there. Now, if only her luck held...

She used her fingers to explore the door before her, and at around waist level to the right, she located a sturdy iron ring. She grasped it and pulled, but nothing happened. A little further investigation revealed that the ring turned, and also that the door opened inwards and not outwards. She smiled to herself at that mistake. She turned the ring and heard a satisfying *snick* as the latch on the other side was raised. She pushed, and with an agonisingly loud creak and squeal of hinges, the door swung jerkily inwards, revealing a pool of solid blackness beyond.

Emily edged forward, leaving the door open for a moment. The scant light from outside barely scratched the surface of the darkness in the room, but it was better than nothing. She looked around, her eyes slowly adjusting. On a shelf by the door, she saw a shadowy shape. Running her hands over it, she quickly discovered that it was a candleholder, complete with candle, and a small tinderbox.

She examined the unfamiliar mechanism of the tinderbox carefully with her fingertips, finding what felt like a rag, an iron plate and a piece of flint-like stone. She experimentally hit the iron plate with the stone and saw a brief spark flare. With a smile, she set to striking the stone and creating more and better sparks. When these hit the ragging, they glowed gently, and Emily breathed on them, trying to encourage them to catch. Soon, with a small flurry, the rag caught fire and a tiny flame licked around it. Emily brought the candle close and held it carefully above the tiny flame, not even breathing in case she accidentally blew it out. The wick caught and a warm yellow glow surrounded her. She gently moved the candle away from the door, blew out the flame in the tinderbox and tamped the smouldering rag with her licked thumb

before popping the box in her pocket and closing the door.

She was in a long, low basement or cellar of some description, with unidentifiable objects piled up against the walls and a haphazard pathway through the middle. She wandered through, keeping a watchful eye open for a way up and into the Palazzo and listening intently for any sounds. At the far end of the room was another door. There was a thin border of light flickering around its edges, obviously shining through from the room beyond, and she opened it carefully, not wanting to announce her presence. Unfortunately the guard posted on the other side had quicker reactions than she did, as he grabbed her arm and she dropped the candle, burning the man's boot. He swore at her and dragged her across the room. It was a mess room of sorts – there were hooks with uniforms hung up on them and tables scattered with dice and tankards. She couldn't have picked a worse entrance if she'd tried.

Arguing with the guard was no use. He was in no mood to listen, and before she knew it, a door was clanking shut behind her and she was stood in pitch darkness in what felt like a damp and smelly cell. She'd seen a low iron bed in the corner before the door had shut, and she felt her way across the room and sat down, pulling the tinderbox out from her coat pocket. It wasn't much use without a candle. The cell was as quiet as the grave. She shuddered gently to herself and wished she had come up with a better simile than that.

As Honoré and Roberto made their way through the darkened streets, it started drizzling gently. Honoré raised the collar of his coat and pressed his hat down on his head to keep off the worst of it. At least the rain dampened down the smell, which he still couldn't get used to.

Roberto seemed unaffected by the weather and trotted alongside him like some sort of faithful puppy. He wondered how much money was driving Roberto in this – it always seemed to come down to money. Even in the London of 1951, he was best able to scrape a living together acting as a re-seller of goods. A fixer, a supplier... someone who could always be relied upon to come up with the right items at the right price.

Not that much different from what Roberto got up to in Venice, he supposed.

They turned a corner and stopped. Up ahead was Marco's shop, and parked outside it a carriage lit with torches that hissed and steamed in the gentle rain.

'Stay here,' whispered Honoré. 'You know what to do?' The little man nodded and faded back into the shadows.

Honoré walked forward towards the carriage. Hearing Marco talking to someone inside the shop, he looked through the door. A lavishly-dressed gentleman was examining one of the masks, turning it over and over in his hands as though it was some jewel-encrusted crown.

'Lovely work, Marco... You have excelled yourself.'

Marco smiled a million-watt smile. 'Oh thank you, my Lord. Most kind.' He noticed Honoré at the doorway and beamed. 'Ah, my good friend. My Lord, here is the man to help load the masks into your carriage.'

Honoré stepped in and nodded to the gentleman. The man glanced at him and sniffed.

'A man of colour... Needs must, I suppose. What is your name, sir?'

'Name's Lechasseur. Whom do I have the honour of meeting?'

The gentleman made an extravagant flourish, and bowed to Honoré. 'You have the honour of serving the Comte Di Meglio.'

Honoré caught the ironic lilt to the man's voice and realised that this was a person not used to dealing with the lower classes. Someone who fancied himself above it all. Well... Honoré smiled a pinched smile to himself.

'Where are the masks that have to be loaded?' he asked innocently.

Marco gestured to five sacks piled in the corner of the shop, each anonymous and sealed at the mouth with ribbon.

Best get to work then. Honoré picked up the first sack. He carried it out to the carriage and stood there waiting while the Comte flounced effetely out after him, struggling with a small parasol to protect himself from the drizzle.

‘Could you get the door?’ asked Honoré.

The Comte looked at him as though he had just been asked to clean the street with his tongue.

Honoré shrugged and dumped the sack to the ground. He opened the carriage door himself and threw the sack in before heading back to the shop for the next. The Comte shrunk back under his parasol and looked around nervously.

‘Can you hurry, please...?’

At that moment there sounded the clatter of heels on the cobbled street and Roberto came running full tilt out of the darkness. He slammed into the Comte and sent him and his parasol flying, the two of them crashing back into the wall of Marco’s shop and then down to the damp stone beneath. The Comte let out a high-pitched scream like a girl and started flapping his arms around. Honoré dashed from the shop in time to see Roberto take the opportunity to land a couple of well-placed punches to the man’s overindulged stomach.

He stood over the two men as they tussled on the wet pavement. With one hand, he gently pulled Roberto away from the Comte, and the thief stood beside him panting and with a crazed look in his eye.

The Comte struggled like a beached fish on the ground. Honoré looked at him steadily.

‘Now my friend...’ He nudged the Comte with the toe of his boot. ‘A few answers if you please. Or I will allow my colleague here free rein on your body.’

The Comte gasped and nodded, sudden obsequiousness surfacing. ‘Oh, please sir, please. Yes... I cannot bear physical pain... Anything...’

‘Good... Let’s start with what these masks are for.’

‘The masks? For a celebration, sir, a magnificent masque in honour, sir.’

‘In honour of what?’

‘Why, it’s the summoning. The day of revelations, sir.’

Honoré frowned. ‘Should I have heard of this?’

The Comte paused and thought momentarily, unsure what to say.

‘Why... no, sir. It has been carefully planned and concealed from all but those who truly need to know.’

At a gentle nudge from Honoré, Roberto snarled and stepped forward, causing the Comte to whimper in terror and press himself back against the wall.

‘But you, sir, I can see that you have the credentials... The word is that the ball will be attended by the highest of the high, the rulers of the Sodality – the Grand Master, even – and that, on the stroke of midnight, they will present their magnificent Child of Time to the very Devil himself. Yes, you heard me right, sir: the very Devil himself. He will be summoned, and will grant the Grand Master power beyond imagining. It is to be a great celebration...’

The Comte looked from Honoré to Roberto. ‘I am just a humble foot servant, sir, one of the many drawn in to help make the ball a success... I am to provide the masks... that is all...’

Honoré thought for a moment. ‘So where is this ball to take place? And when? I may be moved to attend myself...’

‘Oh sir,’ gabbled the Comte, ‘you would assuredly be most welcome. It is tomorrow night. At the Palazzo Bembo.’

Of course it was. Honoré smiled, seeing the pieces start to fall together. And Emily had gone to the Palazzo to try to rescue the children, who were no doubt to play a part in this whole process. He stepped back from the Comte, and gestured to Roberto. With a final snarl at the Comte, Roberto raced away into the darkness again. Honoré crossed to the carriage and, pulling open one of the sacks, removed four of the masks from within.

‘Thank you for your help, Comte. Of course, you realise that if you breathe a word of this to anyone, my friend knows where you live...’

The Comte swallowed and nodded mutely, watching Honoré as he moved from the carriage and away down the street to be swallowed up by the darkness lurking beyond the sizzling torches.

‘May the Devil protect me,’ the Comte muttered as he struggled to his feet and the rain started to come down harder.

When Honoré got back to the house, Maria was waiting for him.

He shrugged off his coat and hung it over the back of a chair, where it dripped water onto the floor.

Maria didn't comment. It was late and he was obviously as tired as she was.

'Anything happen?' he asked.

'Depends what you mean,' said Maria, yawning. 'I phased back to the future, to the Cathedral, just like always. But there was one difference this time: I felt a bit more in control of the process, as if I might actually be able to direct my movements to some extent. So, on the way back, I experimented.' Perhaps, she thought, it had something to do with the fact that she had had companions on the previous trip; maybe Honoré's influence had given her a degree of control over her powers at last, or at least made her more self-assured, knowing that she wasn't totally alone.

Honoré nodded and looked at her encouragingly.

'You remember how, when we first came through together, we arrived on that bridge? Well, that's where I've always appeared before, but tonight, this time, I pictured this house, and willed myself to arrive here...'

'And you did?' finished Honoré.

'Not quite... The rubbish pile out the back, in fact... But the point is, it wasn't the bridge. I did actually change something. I'm gaining control.'

He nodded again. 'I remember when I first saw a timesnake, I had no idea what I was seeing or what was happening. And the first few times with Emily... well, it was a little uncoordinated and uncomfortable to say the least.'

Maria looked thoughtful. 'Yes. The first few times, I was so ill... I started to starve myself, as I couldn't bear to be sick every time I arrived... and of course I never knew when I was going to leave!' Perhaps one day,



she mused, she would gain enough control to stay put in one place? She sighed – being able to settle down was a luxury she'd never been able to contemplate. She wandered to the table and picked up one of the masks that Honoré had appropriated from the Comte. 'Ugly looking thing... So these are the masks that Marco created?'

It was made from black velvet and consisted of a cap that covered the top part of the head, joined to an eye-mask that came down just as far as the nose, leaving the wearer's mouth exposed. It was, as were they all, decorated with many tiny bone fragments, which glinted white against the black velvet, outlining the eye holes, creating faux eyebrows and forming delicate patterning over the skull cap. The bones were probably those of birds and rats, something that could be obtained fairly easily.

Honoré attempted to fit one of the masks over his head. 'I hope they vary in size... or this could be quite a squeeze.'

Maria tried on the one she was holding, and it fitted well. 'So, when is the ball?'

'Tomorrow night.'

'And Emily?' asked Maria.

'Emily has gone to try to help the children,' said Honoré. 'I just hope she manages to stay out of trouble.'

'I'm sure she'll be fine,' said Maria, placing one hand over his. He couldn't care about Emily that much, she thought to herself, if he let her wander off on her own in a place like this.

Honoré looked up into her face, which was mostly obscured by her mask of vivid scarlet and bone, and smiled briefly. 'I'm sure you're right,' he said, but his eyes told a different story.

'You fool!'

The voice woke Emily, and she shielded her eyes against the sudden glare from the doorway. Against all the odds, she'd slept, though she'd no idea how long for.

There was a stranger in the corridor, obviously chastising the guard who'd brought her here. The stranger was maybe in his early thirties and

of medium build, dressed in a rich purple robe over black trousers and jerkin – and he was staring at her with increasing incredulity. He turned on the guard again, his voice deep and rich. ‘Don’t you realise who this *is*?’

Emily frowned. The man had been handsome once, she decided, but his face was now pitted and riven with scars. She realised with a suddenly shock that some of those scars mirrored the markings on Maria’s face. Had he suffered the same tortures as she had?

He was evidently important. She could tell by the way the guard was shifting nervously from foot to foot and muttering apologies under his breath.

‘No, no, of course you don’t... Release her this moment.’ The man turned back to Emily, eyes apologetic. ‘My lady, I am so, so sorry for this inconvenience. This dolt will be punished.’

She decided to play along with this apparent case of mistaken identity. ‘Of course.’

The guard swallowed nervously, standing to one side as Emily swept to her feet in the most imperious manner she could muster under the circumstances. She stood and waited as the scarred man waved the guard out of the way and took her by the arm. ‘This way, my lady.’

She allowed herself to be led out and along the cell-lined passageway. ‘I was starting to think that I would be there forever.’

The man apologised again, clearly mortified. ‘When that idiot guard’s report reached me, along with your description, I had to come and check for myself. Such a terrible error is totally unacceptable. Today of all days.’

Emily nodded. ‘Of all days,’ she echoed.

‘And you must make ready for the ball... for our plans to come to fruition.’

‘Is all prepared?’ she asked, hoping that she might be able to find out a little more.

‘Yes, my lady. All is ready. The guests should start to arrive in about four hours’ time, and then... then we can begin the summoning...’

‘Indeed.’ Four hours? She must have slept right through the night. Honoré would be worried about her.

‘But you must be upset, to have suffered such dreadful treatment... Guards!’

They had reached the top of a flight of steps leading out of the cell area, and at the man’s cry, a second guard unlocked the door there. Emily then followed the scarred man through into what she assumed must be one of the main hallways of the Palazzo. The guard stood to attention.

‘Your orders, Grand Master?’

The man gestured to Emily. ‘Escort the lady to her bedchamber to rest before this evening’s events. Allow no further misfortune to befall her.’

The guard nodded. ‘At once, Grand Master. This way, my lady.’

Emily swallowed. So this was the Grand Master of the Sodality? She wondered exactly who he had mistaken her for... Never mind: she could use this to her advantage, and the first thing to do was to make sure that she wasn’t taken to the room in which her supposed alter-ego could possibly already be sleeping. She could do without that sort of confusion.

As they reached the top of the stairs, Emily stopped the guard with her hand. ‘Guard, I feel that I wish to rest somewhere closer by. Take me to the first free room.’

The guard looked slightly taken aback, but nevertheless nodded, ‘Yes, my lady.’

He opened a door for her just a little further along the passage. She entered, dismissed the guard and waited until the door had closed behind him before finally letting out a sigh of relief. So far, so good... Now, what had the Grand Master said? Four hours to go before whatever it was kicked off... Not long, then, to try to find those missing children. But where to start?

Emily moved over to the window and stood looking out on the courtyard below, wondering what Honoré was up to at that moment,

whether or not he had discovered enough about the Sodality's plans to be able to stop them. And what of Maria? Would she help them, or was she less trustworthy than she seemed – or, at least, too much a part of all this to be on their side? It was a beautiful afternoon, and for a moment she stared out at the gardens beyond the courtyard, wondering how a place so beautiful could harbour such evil.

As she let her mind drift for a moment, she became convinced that somebody was watching her. She swung round, but the room was empty, and when she thought about it, it wasn't so much something she had seen as something she had heard. Somebody was *calling* to her, deep inside her mind. There was a tugging at her memories, and things were starting to slide into place, but she wasn't sure what it all meant as yet.

*Emily?*

Walking through the streets with Maria holding his arm, Honoré admired the bustle of Venice in this time period. So many people, so much life and colour. People walked past them dressed like peacocks, and others sat by the canals and bridges just enjoying the warmth of the day. The rain had cleared up overnight, and the morning's sun had made Venice gleam as though it had just been washed. Even the smell seemed more bearable, although he still couldn't get to grips with the street gutters and constantly having to watch where he stepped.

He was concerned about Emily, about where she was and how her rescue attempt was going. He was also worried about Maria, who, ever since she had realised that she was gaining some control over her powers early that morning, had been lost in thought. He felt sorry for her, and hoped in his heart that when this was all over, she could be happy. All he could see in his mind's eye when he looked at her, however, was a grinning skull covered with deeply cut runes. He resolved to try to ensure that, before she ended up in that state, she would at least experience some period of happiness in her life.

It seemed like everything was down to him right now, and all the responsibility was starting to weigh heavily on his shoulders. He

wondered, not for the first time, whether he'd made the right move in going to the morgue in the first place, or whether he'd have been better off just meeting his clients as arranged.

They stopped off at another friend of Maria's and arranged to borrow a couple of suitable outfits for the masque that night. Honoré was supplied with a well-fitting suit made of dark blue velvet, a ruffled shirt and a black cummerbund for his waist. Maria selected a pale green silk dress, something light and easy to move in, and to this she added a long-sleeved white top and some long, close-fitting pantaloons, also made of silk. He realised she was choosing garments that would hide as much of her scarred flesh as possible and make her less conspicuous. If truth be told, Honoré found her markings curiously attractive, and he felt himself wanting to brush aside the long black hair she hid behind and let everyone see her inner beauty; but he didn't dare, so he busied himself wrapping the outfits in paper and string and admired the city instead as they returned to the house to rest and prepare.

*Emily?*

There it was again. Emily shook her head and wondered if she were going mad. She eased open the door to her room and peeked out, but there was nobody around. It was a girl's voice anyway, and she'd not seen any other women here so far – just the guards and the Grand Master.

Unless... It couldn't be, could it? Maybe the children were looking for her as much as she was looking for them. But how could they know who she was or that she was even there? She padded quickly along the passage, away from the staircase, deciding to follow her instincts. Corridors led off on either side, but she kept going straight ahead, her inner vision guiding her now.

*Keep going, Emily.* The voice in her head made her lose her balance momentarily, and she stumbled. But it was stronger now. She'd found the connection in her mind, and she concentrated on it, sensing the mind at the other end of the link.

*Hello, Emily.* The voice was warm, but there was a undertone of fear, of exhaustion and of consciousness stretched too far and too thin.

‘Violet?’ she whispered out loud. She didn’t know how that name had come to her, but she was sure it was right. She knew a Violet. A girl of around 17 or 18 years old, whom she had encountered in the 1950s, one of the Peculiar, a group of talented children who had been part of a secret project at that time. Could this really be the same person?

‘Where are you?’ she whispered. ‘I can’t see you.’

*I know.* And the voice seemed to stutter in her head. *But we can feel you. Follow my voice and you’ll find us.*

A wave of dizziness passed through her and, breathing heavily, she rested one hand on the wall for support until it passed.

*Turn around. Follow your instincts.*

She did as the whispering suggested. Without thinking too hard about it, she let Violet guide her along corridors and down staircases, trusting the girl not to betray her to the guards, wherever they were. Before long, she was walking along a dingy corridor somewhere in the basement of the building. She had taken what felt like a tortuous route, mainly because, as the voice – Violet? Was it really Violet? – explained, they had wanted to ensure that she remained undetected. Now she stood beside a metal door set into the wall.

*This is the place. Take care, Emily. The sights are not pleasant, and you must be strong.*

Emily nodded, and immediately felt foolish, as there was no-one there to see her. She gently pushed open the door and slipped inside.

The first thing to hit her was the heat: it was humid, sticky and uncomfortable. The second was the noise: the usual silence of the Palazzo was shattered by the sounds of crying and occasional screams, while machinery chugged away in the background.

Keeping to the shadows, she made her way across to a low railing, which overlooked a large area below. She looked through the railing, and her eyes opened wide.

Below her was what could only be described as a torture chamber. There were six tables lined up across the room, and on top of each was strapped the body of a child. One of them was little more than a baby. The tables were spotted with blood and dirt, and while some of the children writhed and cried, others just lay there, utterly exhausted. She could see that some of them had markings on their bodies similar to Maria's, while others had shining rods bisecting their flesh, and one boy even seemed to have a grotesque artificial limb in place of an arm. Emily was reminded of the monstrous part-human, part-machine creature Abraxas, and of the abomination she and Honoré had encountered the last time they had skirted close to the Sodality... Was this how such creatures had been developed? With experimentation undertaken on children? She was sickened by it all, and knew she had to make it stop – whatever the cost.

A flight of steps led down to the chamber, but she dare not descend as she could hear people talking down there, somewhere out of her field of vision. No doubt there would be guards, and maybe scientists keeping track of what was happening. Some of the equipment was certainly not of this time period – glass and electronic components mixed in with steam power and cogs and gears. A mishmash of technology from various different eras, all called into the service of the Sodality.

She edged closer to the railing, straining to get a better look. As she did so, two men moved into view below, taking up positions by a workbench, where they stood and compared notes. She crouched down and listened intently to their conversation.

‘... with a 20% success rate on the increase of mental capacity.’

‘What does that mean in real terms?’

‘For the Child of Time, we are aiming for a sixty per cent increase, so we are still far short of our target.’

‘Sixty per cent! You think we can reach that?’

‘Well, eventually, if we increase the power through the implant...’

At this point the men wandered out of sight again, and Emily could make out no more of what they said. She smiled grimly as she reflected

on what she had overheard. It was that term again: the Child of Time... What could it mean? Something they were trying to create? Was this where she'd been *born*?

Fighting a rising feeling of nausea, she crept around the room, keeping under the cover of boxes and pieces of machinery as far as possible and trying to get to the far side, where she had seen another door. Violet had gone silent in her mind, but she was past that now and determined to rescue as many of the prisoners here as she could manage. If even one of them succeeded in escaping the Sodality's clutches, it would be worthwhile.

A door crashed open somewhere below, and she heard the sound of booted feet approaching briskly across the stone floor of the basement area. She moved over the railing again and peered down just in time to see the Grand Master sweep into view, his purple cloak billowing around him, no doubt come to check on the preparations.

'Surgeon!' He strode over to the closest of the operating tables and glanced dispassionately at the girl lying there. His voice was deep and powerful. 'Surgeon! Attend me now!'

A man came hurrying over to him, nervous and twitchy.

'What is the status? We have but a few hours to prepare for the ceremony, and the chosen ones must be ready.'

The Surgeon nodded, obviously in great agitation. 'We have encountered difficulties, my lord, but we are making progress.'

'Progress!,' hissed the Grand Master. 'I expect more than that: I expect results! You know what is at stake here. We have been planning toward this night for centuries!'

The Surgeon visibly squirmed. 'I realise that, Grand Master, but...'

'No excuses!' the Grand Master roared. 'We must have our most adept time channellers and time sensitives ready for the summoning, with their abilities boosted to the highest possible level.'

'But these are just children, Grand Master. They are wilful, difficult to control. If we presented adult subjects...'



‘No! We need to show the full extent of our achievements. You know as well as I do that it is the children who are the most gifted.’

‘That is so, Grand Master, and we have identified six who may be suitable, but –’

The Grand Master fixed the Surgeon with a steely glare. ‘I do not wish to hear that word. If you cannot do what is required, then there are others here who surely can!’

The robed figure closed his eyes and Emily saw his lips move in silent incantation. There was a sudden gust of wind in the enclosed cellar and a sound like a large piece of stone being dragged across the floor. Emily’s mouth dropped open as one of those hideous gargoyle creatures suddenly hefted itself from a corner and lumbered to where the Grand Master was standing. The Surgeon went as white as a sheet and started to back away as the stone behemoth approached. When the creature was but a pace away, the Grand Master’s eyes shot open, and he glared at the Surgeon.

‘See what we are already capable of! If our work finds favour at the summoning, we shall be granted all power! Obey us and you shall share in that power. Fail us and you shall know what our disappointment feels like.’

The Surgeon nodded enthusiastically. ‘Never fear, my lord, we shall have the children ready.’

‘Good,’ rumbled the Grand Master in a voice like syrup. ‘I do not need any further complications, today of all days... All must be ready for the summoning.’

Emily screwed her eyes tightly closed, her mind a confusion of jumbled thoughts and memories: scenes of blood, death and horror; helpless children being subjected to horrible torture; herself looking on, smiling, as if in a terrible nightmare; and a cacophony of voices, all talking of the Child of Time... always the Child of Time Was she, Emily, the ultimate product of all the torture and suffering that was being inflicted here on the children and babies of Venice and elsewhere through time?

Emily shook her head. Maybe she was this unique individual, escaped from the future, memory wiped, and now working against everything she was created to achieve. Her head pounded and she knuckled her temples to try to silence the throbbing. Was she the Child of Time?

Honoré and Maria were dressed in their borrowed outfits, and wearing their stolen masks; Honoré's a deep scarlet, Maria's jet black. They entered the Palazzo with no problems at all, strolling together past the attendants on the main doors and into a large ballroom where the guests were thronging in tense expectation. The room was magnificent, with baroque carvings and ornate plasterwork in abundance. Around the perimeter on three sides ran a balcony, with yet more elaborately-carved figures supporting the balustrade. Heavy scarlet brocade curtains hung at intervals to screen the private recesses above from the rest of the room; they were tied back with thick tassels and afforded a degree of privacy that Honoré suspected he might need later.

Finely-dressed servants passed around goblets of what tasted like expensive wine, and on a raised dais at the end of the room, a string quartet was playing soft music. Honoré couldn't believe that this was to be the scene of some kind of demonic summoning – it seemed all too refined, too elegantly sophisticated. The women were all dressed in splendid gowns, with hair piled high – or were they wearing elaborate wigs? – and he could smell pomade and powder.

'Keep your eyes open,' hissed Maria as they paused at the entrance to the ballroom.

'I intend to.' He was studying the other guests intently. Although they all had their faces partially covered by the gruesome devil masks, which had presumably been distributed to them prior to their arrival, he could see that there were several other Black men – even a couple of Orientals – among the predominantly Caucasian crowd, and that some of the men had beards and moustaches. He didn't think he'd stand out, unless anyone got too close and realised that he was probably the only man here who'd bathed in the last week.

They made their way slowly through the throng of people, Maria holding Honoré's arm as though he was her consort. They tried to

eavesdrop as they went, without being too conspicuous about it, and Honoré soon realised that he was able to mentally filter out all the trivia – comments about the Palazzo, the wine, the weather and suchlike – and focus on the really interesting stuff, about the Sodality and the summoning. People spoke in a wide variety of different accents and dialects, and presumably different languages too, but he found that, as always when he travelled to other times and places with Emily, he was somehow able to understand what was being said, as if everyone was conversing in English.

‘It’s the form it has always been... the form the Devil wishes to take at this point... we should not question it, just believe in it.’

‘... the Child of Time...’

‘... reward? Why the reward for the Beast is the channellers and sensitives... they have been created by The Sodality for this purpose...’

‘... our noble birthright...’

‘... power... power beyond all imagining, and with that power he shall create the Child of Time...’

‘Isn’t the Child needed for this Summoning then?’

‘Not as far as I know... now... about the children... how many do you think will be presented?’

‘... Child of Time...’

After about half an hour, reasoning that they had learned as much as they were likely to from these overheard snatches of increasingly excited conversation, Honoré steered Maria over to an empty alcove to one side of the room, pausing only briefly on the way so that they could both help themselves to some morsels of food from a row of silver platters arrayed along a nearby table.

‘So, what have we figured out so far?’ asked Maria, licking her fingers surreptitiously.

‘It’s hard to make sense of it all,’ admitted Honoré, stroking his beard thoughtfully. ‘They all seem to be convinced that, come midnight, the Devil’s going to be making an appearance.’

‘Who knows, maybe he will?’

Honoré snorted sceptically. ‘You don’t really believe that, do you? No, I think all that Devil stuff is just window dressing. They’re being whipped up into a state of excitement for some reason. Maybe it has something to do with this Child of Time.’

‘Child of Time...’ mused Maria. ‘What does that mean, do you suppose?’

‘No idea,’ he said. ‘I was picking up mixed messages. Some of the guests seem to think she’s here already, others that she’s something the Sodality is desperate to find. One guy seemed to be saying that’s why the Grand Master needs the Devil’s power... Whatever that is, and whoever she is, I guess we won’t have too long to wait now to find out.’

Emily was still hiding in the basement area of the Palazzo. After the Grand Master had left, the Surgeon had called his fellows together in the cellar below, and they were now holding an impromptu conference. Emily was too far away to follow all the ins and outs of this, but it seemed that the six children strapped to the tables were being prepared for something, and were to be moved out very shortly.

*Emily!*

It was Violet again. In her mind.

*Don’t give up, Emily. We need you.*

Reproaching herself for having allowed the events below to distract her, Emily crept silently across to the door in the far wall and through into the corridor beyond. There she found another door, set into the opposite wall. It wasn’t locked, and she pushed it open gently. This was where Violet was – she could feel her presence here as clearly as if she could see the girl. The sounds of dripping water echoed around the dark room, as did the stirrings of what were probably rats. Emily shuddered and hoped that she didn’t have to meet any more four-legged creatures.

‘Emily?’ A real voice this time, cracked and tired, but the owner was the same.

She carefully crossed the room to a set of bars extending from floor to ceiling at the far end. ‘Violet,’ Emily whispered. ‘Is that you?’

There was a shifting beyond the bars and a small girl emerged from the gloom and stood looking at Emily. It was Violet – the Violet she had met in 1950 as one of a group of uniquely talented individuals living together as a sort of superhuman colony, trying to avoid detection by the authorities or the Sodality, who wanted them for their own purposes. Violet had been one of the most gifted of the group – a child of around 17, but who seemed much younger, with abilities that ordinary humans could only guess at and that she herself had yet to fully grasp. Certainly she could affect human perception. When Emily had last seen her, she had been working with the other children to combine their powers, escape to other times and places... and Emily had hoped at the time that the one thing they would find was happiness.

And yet here was Violet. Pale and bedraggled. And apparently a prisoner.

‘What happened to you? Why are you here?’

Violet shrugged, her patchy brown hair barely covering the scalp of her oversized head. ‘We were caught after about six months. We tried to get away but the people the Sodality sent after us were able to use some sort of mental power against us – psionic science, they called it – and against that we had no defence.’ The girl hesitated, scratching herself absently. ‘They finally trapped us here, in Venice, in this time, and threw barriers around us so that we couldn’t escape. We must have been here for about a year now, kept apart from each other in separate cells along this corridor. We thought all hope was lost. But then I somehow sensed that there was a familiar mind present, and today you finally came close enough for me to contact you.’

Emily looked into Violet’s tired eyes, one bright blue and the other a vivid violet, and reached out a hand toward her.

‘Don’t touch the bars!’ the girl cried, but too late. Emily’s hand brushed against the metal and she felt a violent shock run up her arm, as if she had been electrocuted. She snatched her hand back and cradled it in the other as it continued to tingle painfully.

‘What was that? Have they electrified the bars?’ That seemed an absurd idea here in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, until Emily remembered the mish-mash of anachronistic technology she had seen in the cellar area.

‘No. That was psionic energy. They have raised barriers to keep us. We cannot penetrate them – and believe me, we have tried.’

‘How many of you are there here?’

‘Just the three of us now. Me, Jimmie and Freia. Percival managed to escape, but he’s lost somewhere in the time streams. There were two others with us as well, but they were taken away ages ago for further experimentation and never came back. We could hear the screams from our cells... We may be powerless, but we’re not deaf...’

‘I have to get you out,’ said Emily. ‘I have an idea.’

Without pausing to catch breath, she strode out of the room, across the corridor, back into the basement area she had hidden in earlier and, making no attempt whatsoever to hide her presence, down the staircase into the cellar area below. The Surgeon was there, along with the other medical attendants. They were helping one of the girls down off her operating table. The other five tables were already empty.

‘Attend me!’ she called, in as imperious a fashion as she could.

The men looked up, and the Surgeon’s eyes opened wide. He spoke quickly to the others and they carried on manoeuvring the girl from the table and out of the room while the Surgeon hurried over to Emily.

‘My lady... I had no idea you were here... Should you not be preparing for the ceremony?’

‘I shall be. But first, I need your assistance. Follow me!’ She turned and stalked back up the staircase, breathing a silent sigh of relief. It had been an idea born out of sheer desperation, but somehow it had worked. Whoever the Grand Master had mistaken her for earlier – presumably some senior Sodality official – it seemed that the Surgeon was now under the same misapprehension.

She led the man to the corridor along which the cells were arrayed, then gestured to the doors. ‘The three young prisoners. I wish to see them properly. Bring them out here.’

The Surgeon fidgeted awkwardly. ‘But, my lady, these prisoners have special mental powers. We have to keep them separate and confined –’

Emily fixed him with her most baleful glare, although secretly she was having to suppress a smile as she saw the effect she was having on the man. The poor chap. He was terrified out of his wits!

She enunciated every word very clearly: ‘I know what I am doing, Surgeon. Bring them out here *now!*’

The man nodded and, with something of a whimper, crossed to where an old and grimy wooden box was affixed to the wall. He opened it with a key from his belt and pulled out a sheet of parchment. He looked at Emily.

‘I just need to say the incantation here and the barriers will be removed. Are you *sure*, my lady?’

Emily nodded once. Short and sharp.

With a resigned sigh, the Surgeon held up the parchment and studied it for a moment, his lips moving as he worked out the details of the incantation. Then he started to speak in a language that made no sense at all to Emily; it sounded jumbled and backwards somehow.

The incantation was short, and almost as soon as the Surgeon had completed it, his eyes closed and he collapsed to the floor in a dead faint.

Immediately Emily pulled open the door leading to Violet’s cell and went through.

‘The power has gone,’ the girl said. ‘I have sent that man to sleep. He’ll come to no harm – at least, not by my hand.’ She was standing close to the bars now, one hand touching them, proving that the psionic barrier was no more. ‘Now we must get out of here... Stand back.’

Violet placed her hand over the lock of the cage and closed her eyes. There was a gentle click and the door swung slowly open.

‘Impressive... When did you learn that trick?’ Emily pulled the door open wider and helped Violet out, scared by how tiny and fragile she seemed, her bones seemingly having less substance than those of a bird.

They quickly moved to the two adjacent rooms in turn, and Violet repeated her trick to release Jimmie and Freia from their cells. Jimmie



was, like Violet, a telepath, and a mathematical and musical genius. He was perhaps the same age as Violet, a tall, skinny boy with a ruffled shock of brown hair. Freia was a little thing, only six years old, but with the face of an angel. She was also a powerful time sensitive. Now, though, she was so weak that Emily had to scoop her up in her arms and carry her.

Once they were back in the light of the corridor, Emily paused to catch her breath and take stock. So far, so good. Now all they had to do was get out of the Palazzo...

Outside the Palazzo, darkness had fallen, and Honoré and Maria both felt a wave of excited anticipation spread through the ballroom.

Honoré took Maria's arm and steered her to the staircase and up to the balcony overlooking the main floor. There were fewer people up above and he managed to find a position behind one of the heavy curtains, half-hidden in a secluded recess.

A sudden hush fell over the room. He looked down to see that the musicians and waiters were being ushered out, while the guests were turning expectantly toward a set of closed double doors at one end. All the other doors out of the room were pulled shut too, and the tension rose noticeably.

The double doors opened and a short procession of people entered. At the head was a man holding a large bound book, carrying it in front of him, reverently, as if it were a priceless work of art. Following behind was a taller man, dressed in black and with a purple robe wrapped around him. On his head he wore an elaborate goat-skull mask that covered his eyes, but Honoré could see that his cheeks and chin were scarred with runes. Like Maria's. Thirdly came a woman, short in stature, dressed in a loose tunic in a deep red colour. She too was wearing a goat-skull mask; it covered her face entirely, but her long, dark hair spilled out around her shoulders. Lastly, bringing up the rear, was another man. He bore a large golden chalice, which glinted and sparkled in the candlelight.

The four people took up positions in front of the crowd, and the tall man stepped forward.

‘My friends,’ he began in a voice rich, deep and compelling. ‘We have waited long for this day, but now the wait is over.’

An excited buzz went around the crowd as the man continued. ‘You know that I, your Grand Master, together with my Chancellor –’ he gestured to the woman standing beside him ‘– have been working tirelessly to bring the Sodality the power we deserve. The power to shape matter, to fold time and to create a world where we can bring peace and prosperity to all.’

Honoré leaned forward and whispered in Maria’s ear, ‘That’s what they all say...’

The Grand Master continued speaking, warming to his subject. ‘For today, my friends, today we shall achieve what we once thought impossible. We shall summon one of our benefactors. But before we do this, is there anyone here who has doubts? Anyone who is not totally committed to our cause? For if there is, speak now, and you shall be permitted to leave.’

He cast his eyes over the assembled crowd, who were silent with anticipation.

‘No-one?’ The Grand Master’s eyes scanned the people. ‘Not even you... my Lord Ramusio?’

At this, one of the men in the crowd started back. The people around him moved aside, and he was pushed forward.

‘My Lord?’ stammered Ramusio. ‘I... I have done nothing... I... I am totally committed... I...’

‘My dear Ramusio,’ said the Grand Master. ‘You say you have done nothing, and yet my observers tell me that you have been expressing concerns and doubts to your fellows. What say you to that?’

‘I... I have not, my Lord.’

‘And who then should I believe, Ramusio? You? Or my friends?’

Ramusio found a little strength within himself and looked around. ‘Friends? What friends are these, my Lord? Would friends spread rumour

and gossip for the sake of a little sport?’

The Grand Master chuckled to himself. ‘Oh, my friends love a little sport... and where are they? Why, they are right here.’

He frowned in concentration, his lips moved in incantation. The floor seemed to shift, and a cry of alarm went through the gathered people. Suddenly, something large crashed through one of the high windows of the room. It seemed to be a giant, horse-like creature, and it thundered across the room, its feet crashing against the floorboards, coming to rest just in front of the Grand Master.

Honoré recognised it instantly as one of the stone gargoyle-like creatures. It stood before the Grand Master and moved its head balefully back and forth, scanning the crowd with its glowing red eyes.

‘So, Ramusio,’ said the Grand Master. ‘You didn’t answer my question. Who should I believe?’

Ramusio was rooted to the spot in stunned silence, as were the rest of the crowd.

‘Have you nothing to say for yourself?’ The Grand Master concentrated again, and his lips moved silently. The stone creature rounded on Ramusio and slowly approached him.

Ramusio started backing away, and the rest of the crowd drew back from him, leaving him alone and facing the stone monstrosity. The creature paused and drew back on its haunches.

Ramusio looked at the Grand Master. ‘I did nothing!’ he protested. ‘You have to believe me!’

‘Oh, I believe you...’

And with that, the creature suddenly leapt at Ramusio and landed right on top of him with a sickening crunch.

Some of the ladies in the crowd screamed, and the men gasped. Maria stood with her eyes tightly shut, and Honoré swallowed drily. More death. Wherever he went there was death.

The stone creature shifted its body from side to side, grinding whatever was left of Ramusio into the floorboards, and then shuffled back to the side of the Grand Master, leaving nothing more than a large

sticky mess of blood and pulp on the floor.

‘So my friends... where was I? Ah yes, is there anyone – else – who would like to express their concerns at this point? Anyone?’ He scanned the crowd, a smile pulling at the sides of his mouth. ‘I thought not. Now...’ he clapped his hands together twice. ‘We can begin.’

Two attendants pulled a large rug over to cover the stain on the floor, and others set a low table out in front of where the Grand Master was standing. The men carrying the book and the chalice placed them deferentially on the table and then stood back, while the Chancellor stayed where she was, watching everything from behind her mask, her mouth twitching in a slight smile.

The large stone gargoyle moved to the side of the room where it stood, poised, a sentry on duty.

The Grand Master picked up the ancient book. It was large and bound in a rough, hide-like substance, which Honoré suspected was probably human skin. The robed figure opened the book and selected a page. Then, with a sweeping glance out at his audience, he began to read. Strange, garbled syllables spilled from his lips in a language that – for once – Honoré could not understand and that caused the hairs on the back of his neck to bristle.

As the Grand Master spoke, so the Chancellor moved behind him and picked up the chalice. She then started parading it up and down the hall, raising it to the heavens in time with the cadences of the Grand Master’s voice. Listening and watching from above, Honoré was trying to hold on to his earlier conviction that this was all just theatricals, but was finding it increasingly difficult... He nevertheless maintained his composure as the ceremony continued to take its course below. Maria stood motionless in front of him, entranced by the spectacle.

After about five minutes of incantations, bold gestures and chalice-raising, the Grand Master’s chanting came to a crescendo and abruptly stopped. There was silence in the room; all the guests stood in anticipation. There was not even a cough.

Then, somewhere high above, a bell started to toll. It was midnight. A cool breeze seemed to ruffle the air, and the candles all around the room twisted and guttered. Some were extinguished, and plumes of smoke ascended from them, twisting and curling around the faint currents of air that filled the room.

The Grand Master set his feet apart, placed the book in the hands of one of his acolytes, and raised his arms to the ceiling. ‘As my will, so mote it be.’

The assembled crowd caught on quickly; or perhaps they had done this sort of thing before. Almost as one, they replied, ‘As my will, so mote it be.’

Honoré picked up on the response part way through; Maria the same. It wouldn’t do to be seen to be dissenting. But everyone’s attention was fixed on the imposing figure of the Grand Master at the end of the room.

Another cold gust of air blew through the room and more candles guttered and went out.

‘Eko, Eko, Dæmos,’ said the Grand Master.

‘Eko, Eko, Dæmos,’ repeated the assembled people.

‘Eko, Eko, Mastho.’

‘Eko, Eko, Mastho.’

As the chanting continued in the alien tongue, the doors behind the Grand Master opened to reveal three guards and, between them, six young children. Honoré looked at them carefully. All were ragged and shivering, and all were between about four and 12 years old.

Maria dug Honoré in the ribs with her elbow and spoke without turning. ‘See their arms and faces.’

In the dim candlelight, he could see the scars and wounds that covered their skin – the same markings that Maria bore. One of the children started crying and a guard batted him offhandedly around the head. The boy raised his own arm to protect himself, and Honoré noticed with a shudder that the arm was mechanical. A network of cogs and gears worked away inside its metal frame... It was monstrous.

The children lined up in front of the Grand Master, then dropped to their knees before him, snivelling quietly and obviously totally confused by what was happening. The Grand Master's lips moved again, and a susurrant chant emerged from them – a mixture of exhortation and summoning, some of it in that alien, backwards tongue, but some in words and terms that Honoré understood. The Grand Master was calling upon some sort of creature, asking that it appear before them here and now.

The light flickered and Honoré looked around. A gasp went up from the crowd below, and those closest to the centre of the room stepped sharply backwards, bumping into their neighbours, as a dark pool formed on the surface of the wooden floor. It flickered and sparked, and a slow column of greasy black smoke started to form, writhing and churning above the wood, which gave an audible creak. Someone cried out as the wood started to push itself up out of the floor itself, forming a crude nose and brow. The crowd stumbled slightly as the floor shifted, forming a mouth below the nose. A hollow, echoing cry began; low at first but then rising in cadence and power. The swirling dust cloud thickened, and the very floor seemed to extend up into it, adding to the bulk of the whirling entity.

The crowd shuffled uncomfortably as the spinning creation edged nearer to them. The moaning became a howl and a word could be heard echoing and reverberating:

*'Bbbbbbbb – llllllllllll – oooooooooooooooooooooo...'*

Honoré realised what it was before Maria. 'It's blood... The thing wants blood!'

Without warning, one of the masked guests nearest to the edge of the vortex was snatched into the maelstrom, closely followed by two others. The howling tornado turned a scarlet red, and droplets of blood started to spatter the faces and clothes of those watching.

People were screaming now, women fainting, faces whiter still than the powder they wore. A few of the men were trying to open the doors, but in vain; they were immovable, trapping everyone inside the

ballroom.

The Grand Master smiled broadly. 'We welcome you, o Dæmon. Welcome. Welcome!'

The spinning slowed, and the echoing howl died away. The room quietened, save for the panicked breathing and shuffling of the speechless onlookers, and the cloud of smoke started to drift more slowly.

Honoré saw that there was a shape within the cloud, and he leaned forward to get a better look. The dust and smoke dissipated and, in the middle, slowly revealed to them, was a massive figure.

It was man-like but huge, perhaps eight feet tall. It had large, powerful arms, its torso rippled with muscles and its trunk-like legs were firmly-rooted and stable. Honoré saw with a start that the legs were backwards-jointed like those of a goat, and that coarse fur covered the lower part of the creature's body. Its head was misshapen and over-large, and two curled horns protruded from its brow.

The massive head turned from side to side, and Honoré could see the cruel mouth and intelligent, glinting eyes. As those eyes passed over him, he felt his heart shudder in his body, and Maria stiffened against him. But then the Dæmon's gaze moved on and the feeling subsided.

'Oh God,' muttered Maria. 'They've done it. They've actually done it.'

'I know,' breathed Honoré. 'They've summoned the Devil.'

Emily was relying on Violet to remember the way out of the Palazzo. She would never have been able to retrace her own steps; everywhere looked the same. Miles of damp stone corridors, branching off at intervals and giving onto numerous spiral staircases leading back down into the hell they were trying to leave behind. Smoky torches lit the passageways, but to no apparent purpose – the few rooms she looked into were silent and cold, and the whole place seemed oddly devoid of life, save for the ever-present shadows that danced across the walls, making her imagination work overtime. Several times, she thought the doorways contained watchers – of the stone variety as well as the human – and she wondered how she'd cope if she encountered one of the gargoyle-creatures this close up.

Why was the place so deserted? She crept along yet another seemingly endless empty corridor, Freia held in the crook of her arm and Violet helping Jimmie behind her. She wondered how long her heart could keep beating at this rate. At least it meant that there was no-one around for the children to hurt; she could sense that Violet in particular wanted to hurt as many people as she could at this moment, despite her suggestion to the contrary in the cell. But nevertheless she had a growing sense of nagging unease at the lack of apparent activity in the place.

She wriggled Freia up onto one hip as they ascended a narrow stone staircase to emerge into the stale and greasy air of what appeared to be a kitchen. Taking cover behind a large dresser, Emily gestured for Violet to stay down and be quiet as she heard someone clattering pans close by.

She bobbed her head up to take a quick look, then ducked down again.

‘It’s a cook,’ she whispered. ‘He hasn’t seen us. Stay still and quiet.’

Violet nodded and rested back on her haunches.

Emily listened as the clattering of pots continued. She risked another look. The cook had his back to them and was engaged in the unedifying



task of washing up.

‘It’s okay,’ hissed Emily. ‘He’s washing up. Quietly now...’

She moved out from their hiding place and, keeping low and under cover as much as possible, headed for a doorway that she hoped might lead out into a scullery or even into the open air. The door swung open easily and she slipped though, then glanced back for the other two. Jimmie was propped up against the wall, his head lolling on his chest, and there was no sign of Violet.

Emily shook her head in annoyance. Where had the girl gone? Glancing around her new surroundings, she realised that she had indeed entered a scullery. Set into the wall on the opposite side of the room was a huge, metal-studded wooden door with a thick reed mat in front of it. Next to the mat were several pairs of muddy leather boots. It had to be the way out.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the clatter of pans falling to the floor, followed by a low gargling sound, from the room she had just left. Quickly, she placed Freia gently on the floor and turned back, peering around the door frame. The cook was bent low over the sink and thrashing about in the water. Just to one side, Violet stood motionless, her small hands clenched into fists and her arms ramrod straight.

Looking closer, Emily could see that the cook’s face was actually below the surface of the water in the sink. His legs were kicking and thrashing and his arms flailing uselessly as he tried in vain to pull his head back and away from out of the swirling water.

‘Violet...’ hissed Emily.

No response. With a muttered curse, Emily swiftly crossed the room and grabbed Violet by the shoulders, spinning her around. She reeled as she saw that the girl’s eyes were a glistening black; there was power rolling off her in waves.

‘Violet! Stop it! You’re killing him!’

Violet started to shudder.

‘He’s not your enemy. None of them is. Save your powers... you may need them another time, another day. Don’t kill an innocent man for

what others have done to you! Violet!’

The small girl blinked suddenly, and the blackness of her eyes cleared like clouds shifting to reveal the sun. The cook gasped as he was released and collapsed to the floor by the sink, wheezing, spluttering and clutching his throat.

Emily continued to hold Violet’s gaze. ‘This is not the way. You know that.’

The girl glanced dispassionately across at the man by the sink. ‘I was so angry... He was the first we had seen...’

‘I know,’ said Emily. ‘Trying to control the rage is the hardest thing, but it’s also the most important. If you lose control, then you and your friends will ultimately suffer. You know that.’

Violet nodded, seeming to regain her composure. ‘I know, Emily. And thank you.’

The girl turned and walked back to where Jimmie was struggling to rise to his feet by the dresser. She helped him up, while Emily returned to where she had left Freia. Together they then crossed the narrow scullery to the metal-studded door.

They met and saw no-one else as they emerged into the night. It was black as death, and Emily could barely see to place one foot safely before the other, but the four of them managed to make their way through the gardens and out onto the lanes surrounding the Palazzo with no further problems.

When they were a safe distance away and there was no chance of anyone coming after them – not that anyone seemed to have raised a hue and cry, or even noticed that they had gone – Emily paused and looked back at the Palazzo. The building was a sharp silhouette against the black sky, dark except for one set of windows, which flared with yellow and red-tinged light. Emily hoped that wherever Honoré was, he was safe...

The Dæmon gazed around the room, and people flinched as its stare fell upon them. Even those who had been shrieking were too terrified now to

utter so much as a whimper, although one or two were dribbling freely, eyes rolling and clearly in deep shock. The only people who appeared unaffected in any way were the Grand Master and the Chancellor, who were standing in rapt adoration at this monstrous creature that they had summoned.

Honoré wanted to look away, to blend into the brocade drapes that curtained the balcony, anything other than let the monster slide those eyes over him. But he couldn't: he was caught like the others, hypnotised by the sheer power of the beast. Then he caught a glimpse of something flickering around the creature and narrowed his eyes, blinking and fighting the spell. It was almost like... yes it was... it was the creature's timesnake.

He followed the bizarre, coiling, twisting snake, Möbius in complexity. Its colours were unlike those of any human timesnake he had ever seen, and he could sense it extending far into the past and also away into the future; this creature had a greater life span than any human. He touched the snake tentatively with his mind, acutely aware that with Maria pressed back against him, he could accidentally time jump if he wasn't very careful. He had no desire to find himself somewhere in the history of this being, in a place and time he might well not recognise and, indeed, from which he might have no way back.

The brief touch was enough. Honoré drew breath and withdrew his mental probe. As he did so, he felt Maria tense against him – whatever he'd done had jolted her out of the creature's thrall too. He wondered how long both of them would be able to resist it for.

Without turning, Maria spoke softly. 'What did you do?'

'I tell you something.' Honoré shook his head. 'Whatever that thing is, it's not a demon from hell.'

Maria nodded, 'I've seen many strange things. What do you think it is?'

'Its timesnake... it's like nothing I've seen before. It goes off the Earth, entwines with other worlds, other cultures. I think this creature is an alien. Something from another planet...'

He concentrated again and began further gentle mental probing of the undulating timesnake before him. 'It's... a Dæmon,' he whispered. 'Like the Grand Master said. That's the name of its race. If I go back far enough, I can sense its homeworld.'

Maria nudged Honoré, for below them in the ballroom the Grand Master was addressing the creature. He'd lost some of his previous air of confidence now, perhaps because he was clearly no longer the most powerful being in the room.

'Welcome to Earth, o Dæmon.'

The creature turned its bull-like head and regarded the Grand Master. Then, with a deep and booming voice, it spoke. 'Why have I been summoned a second time?'

'Second time...?' The Grand Master was clearly puzzled. 'This is but the first time we have summoned you, o lord Dæmon.'

The creature snuffled at this. 'You puny-minded Earthlings! You pretend to grasp the secrets of psionic science, yet still you cling to your linear concept of time!'

The Grand Master was hastily conferring with the Chancellor, but from her hand gestures, Honoré wasn't sure that she had the slightest idea what the creature was talking about. He smiled to himself. That's what came from messing about in the web of time... Things could get very confused if you weren't careful.

The Grand Master turned back to the Dæmon, drew himself up to his full height and addressed the creature. 'My Lord Dæmon. We have summoned you here at this time to bear witness that your race's experiment on Earth has been a great success. Through the Sodality's skilful manipulation, human evolution has advanced to a level previously undreamed of, with the creation of time channellers and time sensitives.'

He clapped his hands together, and the six kneeling children were prodded to their feet by the attendants and separated into two groups of three. They too were mesmerised by the beast.

'See these fine examples of our work. Individually, they may seem no different from other human beings of their era, but put a time channeller'

– he gestured to the first group – ‘together with a time sensitive’ – he indicated the second group – ‘and they can take you anywhere in time and space! Yes, with their combined abilities, they can move fettered between the ages, and take others with them! No longer do we – or you – need to be restricted to the psionic nexus points! We present these fruits of our labours for your appreciation, Lord Dæmon, and ask that you now bestow your great powers on us – on me – and leave this world to our wise governance.’

The Grand Master bowed and gestured with his hands, indicating that these pitiful children were now the Dæmon’s to do with as it wished.

The creature looked at the Grand Master for a moment, and then a booming, echoing sound rang out. Honoré realised that it was laughing.

‘For me?’ chuckled the creature. ‘I am Mastho! A Dæmon! What use do I have for humanity’s first childish steps into infinity?’

‘My Lord Mastho,’ said the Grand Master, stepping forward a pace. ‘This is just the start. With your power bequeathed to me, we will be able to continue the work and create the ultimate product of human evolution: the Child of Time! The first of a truly new breed, combining the abilities of a time channeller and a time sensitive in a single individual... able to traverse the years alone and unaided. With your power, we shall achieve this goal, find the genetic key to free movement throughout all time and space!’

The Dæmon was silent for several moments. The Grand Master and the Chancellor looked up at it expectantly, their faces still hidden beneath their goat-skull masks.

Slowly, the creature raised its head and started gazing about the hall... apparently looking for something. ‘There is someone here...’ it said, its voice low and threatening.

Watching from the gallery, Honoré and Maria shrank back slightly. Had the creature somehow registered their presence? Perhaps when Honoré had probed its timesnake?

‘... someone old and yet young... a time traveller...’

The creature continued its slow scan of the room, but the Grand Master broke in. ‘Of course, my Lord. These six children are the most adept of our time sensitives and time channellers. They have been required to travel through time on many occasions, always under guard of course, to test the extent of their abilities.’

Mastho turned its head back to regard the Grand Master. ‘Perhaps that is it...’ It raised an immense hand to point straight at the masked figure. ‘So, you consider your experiments a success?’

‘Why, yes, My Lord... can you not see? We have summoned you here with us to observe our accomplishments and rejoice.’

‘Rejoice?’

The Grand Master nodded enthusiastically, and glanced at the other assembled Sodality members for corroboration. They all smiled inane and nodded along with their leader.

The Dæmon shifted and took a step towards the Grand Master, looming over him. ‘I shall tell you what I think of your experiments. They are not a triumph. They are an *abomination!*’

A collective gasp went up from the masked throng. Of all the things they might have expected to hear, this was not one of them.

‘An abomination, because they threaten the very plans of my race. The Dæmons seeded this planet you call Earth many aeons ago... and we have been watching it carefully ever since, monitoring the development of your puny race. My people set this planet on its evolutionary course, and now you... you and your *Sodality...*’ – it spat the word with contempt – ‘have dared to interfere with that course through your clumsy meddling with history? You have *corrupted* our experiment!’

As the creature’s roar of displeasure echoed around the room, the Grand Master tried to retain his composure, although he, like his fellows, was clearly alarmed by this unexpected turn of events. He saw out of the corner of his eye that the many of the masked adherents were edging closer to the doors, perhaps in the hope of battering them down and making their escape if this all turned out far nastier than any of them had expected.

‘My Lord,’ he began in a placatory tone. ‘No disrespect was intended... Everything we have done has been with the noblest of motives, to demonstrate to you the full potential of humankind, and to serve your purposes. The children are –’

‘*Children!*’ Mastho’s voice was a roar of pure energy. ‘I have no need of children! You. Grand Master. You have subjected them to pain and suffering for nothing!’

‘Nothing? But –’

‘*Silence!*’

The creature’s roar echoed away and the room fell silent. All whispering and shuffling stopped, and everyone stood in hushed awe, awaiting the Dæmon’s next proclamation. All very aware that it could also be the last thing any of them ever heard.

The seconds ticked by, and the Dæmon seemed to be enjoying holding them in its thrall. Eventually it spoke again, this time more quietly. ‘Although I am greatly displeased by your actions, I am prepared to be generous. If, by the time of my third and final appearance, the Sodality has succeeded in wiping out all these so-called time channellers and time sensitives from the face of the Earth, throughout history, I might be prepared to overlook this unfortunate meddling. Otherwise, I shall judge our experiment a failure... and destroy this planet!’

The Grand Master glanced at his Chancellor, aghast. ‘But, my Lord, that would be a near-impossible endeavour. Through our work, we have already caused time channellers and time sensitives to be born throughout human history. One of our biggest challenges is to locate and capture these special individuals, to use for our purposes. There are many still at liberty... possibly hundreds! To find and kill them all... would take centuries!’

‘I give you one thousand years exactly,’ replied the Dæmon. ‘My third and final summoning shall be in the time of your own origin, your year 2586... and then, I shall decide whether this planet has been a success... or a failure.’

Whispering and muttering started up again amongst the masked adherents. Honoré saw that some of them were looking around them, desperately seeking a way out – presumably these were time channellers and time sensitives who had been working willingly for the Sodality's cause, and who now found themselves facing a sentence of death. Others were glancing nervously at their fellows, possibly trying to spot which of them was now under this genocide order.

The Dæmon smiled, knowing full well the effect its words were having. It turned back to the Grand Master, whose mask could not disguise the fact that he was deeply shocked to have been presented with this ultimatum. 'To assist you in your endeavour,' said the creature, its voice cutting through the babble, 'I shall make a start, and these innocents shall suffer no more.'

It reached out a hand, extended a finger, and the small group of children were instantly vaporised. Wisps of dark smoke rose from where they had been standing, and a dusting of ash fell gently to the wooden floor.

There was silence in the room.

'And now I take my leave... Remember... one thousand years...' And with that, the Dæmon abruptly turned in on itself, as if it had all been some trick of the light, and vanished from sight.

With the creature's hold over the room broken, panic erupted. People surged towards the doors, banging on them frantically and demanding to be let out, and screams rang out from some of the women as they were thrust aside in the rush.

'My friends!' shouted the Grand Master, but no-one was listening to him now.

Watching from above, with Maria still close by his side, Honoré saw that the situation was descending into chaos. He waited to see what the Grand Master would do next; would he be able to restore order and reassert his authority?

The Grand Master turned and nodded to his Chancellor. At this signal, she pulled a pistol from beneath her robes and fired it once into



the ceiling.

The loud retort shocked everyone into silence once more.

‘My friends...’ started the Grand Master again. ‘Why this panic? Calm yourselves.’

One of the crowd stepped forward. ‘Are you mad! You heard what that... that thing said... Our fellows are to be slaughtered! This is not what we have been working towards!’

‘You are right, of course,’ admitted the Grand Master. ‘We badly misjudged the Dæmon’s reaction. But it is more important than ever now that we keep our heads and work together as one! We have been set a challenge, and we can meet that challenge. We have achieved so much already, and now we have a new focus for our efforts. Before, we were like children ourselves, struggling to understand and to know where we were headed. But now we have a firm direction, and a time frame in which to work. We can still succeed!’

He turned away from the crowd and motioned his Chancellor to come closer. Together they had an intense, muttered conversation. Honoré, far above on the balcony, could hear nothing of what was being said, but he suspected that the very future of the Sodality was being mapped out right here and now.

The Grand Master turned back to his people. ‘It is agreed. Our loyal time channellers and time sensitives, you have nothing to fear. You shall not die: on the contrary, you shall be crucial participants in our efforts to cleanse the time streams of renegades.

‘Furthermore, our scientists must continue to work toward the creation of the Child of Time, for that will give us the ultimate means to conduct the search through time and space. Any who remain loyal to us will be guaranteed wealth and happiness and protection from the purge. We shall also put our scientists to work to find a means to reverse or annul the time channeller and time sensitive abilities, so that those who aid us can be protected from the Dæmon by the time it makes its third appearance.’

The Grand Master smiled, holding his arms aloft and standing before his people like some kind of prophet. And that, Honoré thought, was probably exactly what he was. Taking the words of his god and presenting them to his people in a manner that they could accept. It was obvious that he needed the continued co-operation of his loyal time channellers and time sensitives, and no doubt he would say anything necessary in order to secure that. Honoré had seen this sort of thing happen before in London; gang leaders twisting the facts so that the rank and file bought into them and didn't think to question the truthfulness of what they were being told. But he knew what followed: anyone who didn't toe the line would meet with a tragic and unexplained *accident*.

'Furthermore, my friends,' the Grand Master had not yet finished. 'We must appoint someone to oversee this great endeavour. Someone we trust and who has the capability and determination to do what has to be done. Who better, then, to be charged with this most important of tasks than my own Chancellor? As you know, she herself is a time channeller, so she will feel as keenly as you do the urgency and importance of what we have to achieve. Henceforth, my Chancellor shall be known as the High Executioner... and with you as witness, this day the appointment is made.'

Emily was woken by the sound of the door opening, and she cracked open one eye to see Honoré and Maria entering the safe house. It was still dark outside, though the rosy glow of dawn was just touching the sky.

Emily stretched like a cat and yawned. Her legs were stiff where she'd curled them beneath her body in the battered old armchair under the window. She'd wanted to bring the children back – make them eat and sleep – but Violet had stubbornly resisted the idea, her strength of mind increasing with every step away from the Palazzo. Finally she'd turned to Emily, touched her gently on one arm.

*Thank you.*

'But –'

Violet had said nothing, just taken Freia from her arms and grabbed Jimmie's hand. Before Emily had had a chance to react – not that there was anything she could have done to have stopped them – they had vanished, and she had been left to return alone.

'Sorry if we woke you.' Honoré's words dispelled the last of the sleep from her brain. He hung the jacket of his costume up on a peg behind the door.

'It's okay,' said Emily, stretching again. 'I was dreaming about stars and travel.' She wondered if there was any food in the house.

Maria barely managed to suppress a yawn herself. 'After what we've seen tonight, I don't think I ever want to dream again.'

Honoré chuckled. 'Sleep without dreams. That'd be worth a price. But we do need to rest.'

'Before you do,' said Emily, 'there's something I have to tell you.'

Honoré and Maria glanced at each other. 'What's that?'

'I rescued some of the children... and Honoré, it was Violet, Jimmie and Freia! I got them out of the Palazzo and then they vanished and...' As Emily spoke, her words spilled out faster and faster, falling over themselves as she explained what had happened, how they'd escaped, what Violet had done, and what she had heard about the Child of Time. She felt in her soul that this was the answer to her amnesia and to everything that had been happening to her – this was her identity, what she'd been searching for these two past years, and it made her heart and soul glow with pleasure to know that she'd found it.

'Slow down there.' Honoré laid a hand on her arm

'But Honoré... you don't understand,' she continued breathlessly. 'It all fits. I think I must be this Child of Time they're talking about. My missing past is here –'

He frowned. 'It could be. But don't go rushing to conclusions. Maria and I... we've had a pretty interesting evening ourselves. And we found out some things that –'

'... and if this is my past, then I can deal with it, really I can, Honoré. It just feels so great that I can...'

‘Emily.’

‘... finally stop worrying about it and...’

‘Emily!’

‘... start to get my life back on track.’ Emily paused, panting for breath, suddenly aware that Honoré and Maria were both looking at her strangely. ‘What? What is it? I’m right, aren’t I?’

Honoré shook his head gently, and for a brief moment Emily thought that he was expressing disagreement, but then she realised that he was just quietly amused by her burst of excitement. Then she saw the affectionate smile in his eyes turn to a look of concern, and she followed his gaze to Maria, who was gripping the back of the chair with her teeth clenched.

‘What is it?’ He grabbed her shoulder, but she pulled away, doubling over as though she’d been punched in the stomach. ‘Maria?’

‘I’m not sure. I think...’

But Emily knew. ‘She’s phasing again.’ She leapt out of the chair. ‘We’re going with her this time.’

‘I think,’ Maria spoke through gritted teeth, ‘I can control it. But hurry.’

Emily took her hand gently, offering support. ‘Where are we going?’

‘The future. St Paul’s,’ said Honoré, taking Maria’s other hand. ‘Let’s see if we can finish this.’

Maria relaxed, and Emily could feel the power. Static electricity tingled through her hand, and she had to fight the urge to let go. She wondered where Violet was, and if she’d ever see her again, as the room flickered from view and the air caught in her lungs.

Blue lightning filled the room in a place and time that had yet to see the wonders of electricity, and the three travellers faded from sight, leaving nothing but the scent of ozone and some rapidly-dissipating residual sparks flickering around the floorboards.

# The Child of Time

London, 2586

## 1

The High Executioner again found herself watching Dr Smith via the monitor screen on the desk in her room. He was in the suite he had been given – or, to be more precise, confined in – on the top floor of the Palace, gazing out of the window and down the Mall. As usual, he seemed completely at ease. He had lit a cigarette and was blowing a long, thin stream of smoke from his lips. Then, with a smile, he started blowing smoke rings and even, extraordinarily, a few smoke squares. At length, he wandered over to the table where his lunch had been served, dipped a finger into the bowl of trifle and licked the chocolate cream off absently. Did he somehow know that she was observing him? She couldn't see how he could, and yet she strongly suspected that he did. She felt a strange compulsion to go and talk to him again, and eventually decided to resist it no more.

She turned to the acolyte posted by the door. 'You there. I am thirsty. Fetch me a jug of water.'

The acolyte shifted uncomfortably. 'But, my lady, the Grand Master said that I...'

'He said that you were to assist me, did he not?'

'Yes, my lady, but...'

'Then what are you waiting for! Do as you are instructed!'

'Yes, my lady.'

The acolyte opened the door and went out. The High Executioner waited until his footsteps had receded down the corridor, then followed him out.

When the High Executioner entered Dr Smith's suite, after rapping perfunctorily on the door, she saw him give a slight smile of satisfaction, as if he had fully expected her to come. He was still over by the trifle bowl, and licked his finger again before turning to address her.

'High Executioner. To what do I owe this pleasure?'

The High Executioner knew she ought to feel contempt for this man, but actually she had a sneaking admiration of him, and even, she realised to her surprise, a little fear. How long had it been since she had last felt fear?

'Dr Smith. I...'

Dr Smith looked at her levelly. 'Yes?'

'You asked me, two days ago, when the summoning ceremony was to be. There is no reason why you should not know. It is to take place tomorrow.'

'That soon... And you still hope to deceive this creature... this *Dæmon*?'

'I have told you before, Dr Smith, we do not speak that name!'

'Oh, come now, isn't it time we stopped playing these games? You know as well as I do that Mastho – and yes, I know I'm not supposed to speak that name either – is no deity. It is, however, an extremely powerful being, and perfectly capable of destroying this planet.'

'But that will not happen. The creature – all right, the *Dæmon* – has one other choice: it can bequeath its powers and then leave this world. It will be satisfied with the progress we have made, and we will prevail, of that I am certain.'

'And what happened when you performed the trial summoning?'

'How do you know about that?'

Dr Smith smiled and put his forefinger to his lips.

The High Executioner shrugged. 'So you know. What of it? We chose the time nexus carefully, a point to test the powers we had, to try to learn more about how to control the process.'<sup>1</sup>

‘And what happened?’

‘It failed. We lost contact with our agent in that time.’

‘But you did succeed in summoning the Dæmon.’

‘Yes. For us, it was the second time, but for the creat... for Mastho, only the first. We finally realised what it meant when it told us in Venice that it had been summoned once before. The web of time can be very complex and confusing.’

Dr Smith gave a wry smile. ‘I am well aware of that, young lady.’

The High Executioner looked levelly at the man before her. She had squashed so many underfoot, meticulously planned the deaths of so many more, created her own monstrous troops to do her bidding, even harnessed the powers of unfathomable creatures from outside time to try to ferret out those who would hide from her. And, rather to her surprise at first, she had found that she relished all that death and destruction: the screams of a time sensitive being torn to pieces by one of her hybrid man-machines were music to her ears; the sight of a time channeller being sucked dry by one of the entities she commanded made her feel warm inside. The power was intoxicating. She and the Grand Master had stepped forward through time, stopping off every few years for a week or so to make appearances, check the progress of the plan, and to mete out suitable punishment and discipline to the rank and file. So why did this insignificant man make her feel so uneasy? Like some naughty young girl who had been caught cheating in a school test? And why, despite that, did she feel that he was someone she could be completely open with, someone she could really talk to, in a way that she never had to anyone else.

The man stubbed out his cigarette on the table and stepped towards her. ‘You may feel that you can handle the Dæmon, but you’re wrong. Your bluff will fail. The Earth will be destroyed. Humanity will be wiped out.’ He looked at her keenly. ‘But we’ve been through all this before. Why have you really come here, my lady? Hmmm? And without your guards?’

She walked to the window and looked down the Mall and out over the blasted landscape of London. In the forecourt of the Palace she could see two of the stone gargoyles ranging back and forth, implacable guards against any unauthorised visitors.

‘I was intrigued,’ she said eventually, ‘by what you said about my past: about how I came to join the Sodality, and what I was like when I was younger.’ She turned to look at him. ‘I still don’t believe you, of course, but I am puzzled as to why you should concoct such a story.’

‘Are you now?’ Dr Smith smiled, not unkindly. ‘I promise you, it was no story. I was telling the truth. About that, anyway. Your Ruling Council, on the other hand, were right to be suspicious of me.’ He sniffed dismissively. ‘I never really had any intention of helping them to commit even more murders. That was just something I said to pique their curiosity, to get me in here without them setting those gargoyle creatures on me or simply shooting me on sight.’

‘But why? Why did you want to get in here?’

‘To talk to you, of course.’ Dr Smith settled himself into a comfortable chair and steepled his fingers under his chin, fixing her with a steely gaze. ‘I have a question to put to you: if you had an opportunity to undo all the wrongs that the Sodality have done, to set history back on a course where they never came to power in the first place, and the Dæmon was never summoned, would you do it?’

The High Executioner laughed. ‘Why on Earth would I want to do that? The Sodality have granted me a position of great responsibility and power.’ The idea was absurd, preposterous. And yet, there was something curiously intriguing and seductive about it too... ‘I relish that responsibility, revel in that power,’ she continued, no longer entirely sure who she was trying to convince. ‘I have no regrets over anything I’ve done. The killings have all been necessary; a sacred duty. I wouldn’t change a thing.’ She gave another laugh, although it sounded rather hollow, even to her. ‘Anyway, your question is totally hypothetical. You have no freedom to grant such an opportunity. In fact, you have no freedom at all: you are a prisoner here. Like so many others before you,



subject to my whim.'

Dr Smith nodded. 'You may believe that... but you are mistaken. I can leave here any time I please. But... I wanted to have this conversation with you first.'

What was he talking about now? 'Oh, you silly man, you do amuse me.'

'Do I, indeed?' Dr Smith looked at her kindly. 'So, what is your answer?' he asked softly. 'Would you do it? Would you change the past to protect the future rather than to destroy it?'

Thoughts raged through the High Executioner's mind. For the first time in a long while, she was confused. She felt deeply-buried memories trying to surface, pushing against dimly-perceived barriers in her mind. Instinct told her that this stranger was telling the truth. She gazed into his eyes and could see peace, and hope. And yet...

'If I believed you could do it...Yes.' she whispered. Her voice sounded strange in her head, and she wasn't sure she'd even spoken.

He raised one hand, cocked his head to the left, and said, 'It would not be I who would do it... but you. If you use your abilities wisely, you will make a new history for the Earth, and the Sodality will become mere ghosts of a forgotten timeline. What if I could show you? Something that would convince you.'

Dr Smith moved swiftly across the room to the door leading to the suite's bedroom. He paused with his hand on the doorknob. 'I'll be back shortly,' he said brightly, before opening the door and stepping through.

The High Executioner watched him go, wondering what he was up to now. This man was strange, an enigma; he said seemingly foolish things, and yet was clearly intelligent and thoughtful. He was a mystery she was determined to crack.

At that moment, an immense noise came from the other room: the sound of engines heaving in rising cadences of power.

'Dr Smith?' she called. 'Dr Smith! What's happening?'

She strode across the room and flung open the door. She was just in time to glimpse, in one corner of the bedroom, a pulsing blue light that

rapidly dissipated. The sound faded away at the same time.

She looked around the room. A window. A fireplace set in the wall. A large four poster bed against another wall. No other exit. And no Dr Smith.

She hurried to the bed and looked underneath. Nothing. She moved to the fireplace and peered inside. Far too small for anyone to have got up there; and no mess of soot beneath, either. The window was closed and shuttered. No-one could have got out that way.

Dr Smith had vanished into thin air.

St Paul's Cathedral was the site of hectic activity. Groups of technicians were wandering the vast spaces of the floor, laying cables, organising the clearance of the piles of junk and setting up a large dais in front of the main altar. All this was taking place under the watchful eye of a number of Sodality guards.

The rotting corpses had been cut down from outside the main entrance and were now piled outside, burning merrily. The pyre was being constantly fed with old bits of wood, cloth and anything else inflammable that the clearance team could pull from the building.

It was being prepared for something... and Honoré, Maria and Emily, hiding in the darkness on one of the deserted galleries overlooking the main body of the Cathedral, had quickly guessed what that something must be.

They had avoided capture so far, mainly because of the control that Maria had rapidly developed over her power. After the initial realisation that she could control it at all, she had become adept very quickly indeed. The trip from Venice had been smooth and fast, and Maria had navigated the way effortlessly, shifting them all sideways from the main chamber into the upper gallery, where the blue electric blaze of their arrival had gone unnoticed by anyone.

They peered out over the activity below. All traces of Maria's camp had gone now. She wondered what they had made of it. What, too, had become of the city's other occupants, such as the soldiers and civvies who inhabited the ruined Houses of Parliament? Were they watching from a distance, not understanding what was about to happen?

'When do you think it's all going to begin?' asked Emily. She had been more subdued since their arrival, and particularly since Honoré and Maria had told her about the summoning ceremony they had witnessed. Maria hoped she was all right and not becoming too wrapped up in her preoccupation with her amnesia. Honoré had said how important it

was to her, and yet the conclusions she had leaped to could surely not be correct.

Maria nudged Honoré in the side. ‘Look there,’ she gestured to the stage area. ‘It’s almost complete. The clearance must have been going on for days. I’d say that it’s tonight, or at the latest tomorrow. Look at how they’re all rushing to try and get it ready.’

One of the workers below stumbled and dropped a boxful of nails all over the floor. They scattered out everywhere and the man uttered a silent curse. He started to pick them up, but one of the Sodality guards spotted the mishap and came over. The trio could see him arguing with the man, and then, abruptly, he lifted his hand and brought a baton crashing down over the crouching man’s back. The man spilled the nails again and hurriedly started to pick them up.

‘They’re obviously not going to stand for any inefficiency,’ muttered Maria. This was her home they were invading! She’d never quite understood herself what had drawn her to this place, when she could have picked a thousand smaller, less conspicuous ruins to camp in, but it had always seemed that the Cathedral’s religious significance and imposing architecture had been enough to keep people away – plus, of course, the swinging corpses outside – and no-one had ever come to bother her. Until now.

Emily pushed back from the balustrade and stretched her legs out. She raised a hand to the tapestry on the wall to steady herself, and found that it gave under her touch. She pushed it to one side and discovered that behind it was a small side-chamber .

‘Honoré!’ she hissed. ‘Come and look.’

The three of them slipped into the alcove. Inside were a number of ornate robes hanging from a rail. Maria remembered them – how they’d once looked in Venice. Back then, the outfits had been deep, jewel colours – rich purple, ruby red and midnight black, but now they had faded to greys, lilac and pink through a thousand years of history.

On a small wooden table nearby, Maria found some other familiar objects: the ceremonial chalice, the bowls and the candles. Paraphernalia

for the summoning ceremony that they had witnessed either mere hours ago or a full millennium ago, depending on one's perspective.

'Where's the book?' Maria picked up the chalice, cradling it gently, before replacing it. It didn't feel right.

Honoré shook his head. 'I guess they keep things like that securely locked away.'

'Hadn't we better move from here?' asked Emily nervously. 'Someone's bound to come to collect this stuff at some point.'

'You're right,' said Maria. 'There are other rooms we can hide in further around the balcony.'

Keeping close to the walls, out of sight from the workers below, they made their way around the balcony until they found a similar recess opposite. This was musty and unused and seemed as good a place as any to hide out while they waited for the inevitable.

There was a sudden commotion from down in the body of the Cathedral. Guards were being sent off to different points in the ruins, ushering the technicians out of sight, and a couple of robed acolytes, clearly more senior, were barking orders at them. Five of the stone gargoyle-creatures had arrived and were now ranging about the floor, their feet crunching against the tiles as they moved. One of the guards directed them away from the main area of the Cathedral, and two of them took up positions either side of the main entrance, while the others lurked half-hidden in the shadows around the edge. Then silence descended as the guards moved off.

'What's happening?' whispered Emily, scanning the Cathedral for any signs of movement or clues as to what was going on. 'They seem to be waiting for something.'

There was a sound by the main door. The large portal grated against the floor as it was pushed open and a man dressed in black combat gear stepped cautiously through. It was Honoré who recognised him.

'Its Gray!'

The man moved furtively a little way into the body of the Cathedral, looking all around him. When he was satisfied that everything appeared

safe, he stepped back to the door and gestured to someone beyond it. The door was pushed open a little further and a group of around half-a-dozen soldiers, all wearing similar black combat outfits, entered behind him.

Emily spotted the blonde hair of Hannah, and wondered if Micah was also there among them.

‘What are they doing?’ she whispered.

Honoré looked carefully out over the expanse of the Cathedral. ‘I think,’ he began, ‘they must have come to see what’s been happening here over the last few days. They’re curious...’

Suddenly Maria understood what was happening.

‘They’re walking into a trap!’ she said. ‘The Sodality must have seen them coming.’

‘We’ve got to warn them!’ Emily moved as if to step forwards, but Honoré grabbed her arm.

Maria was still watching the small group of soldiers as they stealthily crept further into the church. ‘It’s too late.’

One of the stone gargoyles moved, its large misshapen head slowly turning with an echoing grating sound to look at the soldiers. There was a moment’s silence, then all hell broke loose.

With a rasp of stony wings, one of the creatures swept down out of nowhere and snatched one of the soldiers from where he was standing. There was a hideous shriek, which echoed and re-echoed around the cavernous interior. The cry ended abruptly and there was silence again as the others stood below, not quite sure what had happened to their fellow.

Then it started to rain. The pattering of liquid sounded softly, and red droplets fell around the small group of soldiers, who had now moved into a more defensive position.

Gray shouted something, and the group made to move back towards the door, but another gargoyle was there, blocking their way. They raised their guns, and shots echoed and ricocheted around. They all ducked as their own bullets whizzed back past them. The statue was unaffected.

Maria watched horrified as a third gargoyle approached the group from the other side, stony talons reaching out for Hannah, who was trying to edge around the back, her heel skidding on the blood that had fallen from above. In a moment the creature was on her, gripping her shoulder and hoisting her bodily off the ground. The rest of the group spun around and saw their comrade held aloft by the monstrosity. She screamed as she was thrown hard and high through the dusty air, her limbs flailing and body arcing until finally she came crashing down onto the altar.

Emily raised her hands to her mouth and stifled a cry. There was no further movement from where poor Hannah had landed. The rest of the soldiers were now milling in confusion. Every way they turned there were gargoyles before them, circling them, moving in.

The end was quick. Emily pressed her face into Honoré's shoulder, but Maria watched grimly, her mouth twisted in anger and horror. For all three of them, it strengthened their resolve that, whatever else happened that night, they would do everything they possibly could to try to prevent the Sodality from achieving their aims.

When it was over, silence fell once more. The grating of stone on stone stopped and the gargoyles fell motionless. The Sodality guards emerged from where they had been waiting and calmly checked what was left of the soldiers – not much more than a large red puddle on the floor, littered with indefinable chunks of meat, bone and sinew. Satisfied, the lead guard gestured to the gargoyles, and they moved back to their positions around the building. Other men emerged with cloths and pails of water and started washing the floor, sweeping the mess away, presumably so that it would not be there as an eyesore during the coming ceremony.

The Cathedral seemed to grow darker, despite the eternal twilight outside. A chill seeped through the building and the shadows deepened. An air of expectation hung over the place.

Honoré quietly moved out of hiding and onto the balcony to survey the body of the Cathedral. All was quiet. The preparatory work had been completed and a table covered in black cloth now stood on the raised dais down by the old altar. The scene of demonic ritual was completed by a pair of black candles either side of a large book rest sitting in the centre. A red cloth hung above the dais emblazoned in black with the familiar sigil of the Cabal – a crude representation of a horned beast – and a large pentagram was marked on the swept floor.

Honoré was joined at the balustrade by Emily and Maria, who stood silently looking at the set-up below them.

‘It’s soon then,’ whispered Maria.

‘Yes,’ rumbled Honoré.

Emily touched Honoré’s arm, gesturing with her head to the other side of the Cathedral, to the area of the balcony by the room with the robes and other paraphernalia. Over in the gloom, several indistinct figures were moving, going in and out of the room.

Maria glanced back towards the altar. ‘I think it’s starting,’ she hissed.

Down below, silent rows of black-clad figures were filing into the body of the church. The quiet procession was eerie, and every so often a footfall could be heard crunching on something loose on the floor below.

More and more people filed into the church, forming rows before the altar. A low chanting started up, smooth and susurrant. It raised the hairs on the back of Honoré’s neck, and Emily shivered and hugged herself. The sound was alien. The same alien tongue that Honoré had heard the Grand Master speaking a thousand years earlier in Venice.



A smaller procession started on the other side of the balcony. Figures moved through the velvet darkness towards the stairway down into the apse of the Cathedral. They were carrying candles, and in the flickering light, Honoré could see the same two figures as had presided over the ceremony in Venice – the tall man and the petite woman – leading the procession in their elaborate goat-skull masks. Following them were a man bearing the large, leather-bound book and a woman carrying the chalice; then came further acolytes. All were dressed in the faded robes they had seen in the ante-room – the Grand Master in lilac, the High Executioner in pink.

The procession passed slowly around the balcony and down the spiral staircase to the ground floor. The chanting stopped abruptly, and the four robed figures moved in silence through the massed ranks of the faithful to the altar. There, the book was placed on the dais with the chalice next to it. The acolytes took up positions around the altar while the Grand Master and the Chancellor – now the High Executioner – stood facing their disciples.

The Grand Master raised his hands high, and spoke in a clear voice that carried through the air.

‘My friends. Fellow believers. We have travelled far to reach this point. But now. Tonight. The summoning shall be complete, and we shall be masters of all.’

With that, he picked up the ancient book. Honoré recognised it as the same large, hide-bound tome as before, and felt a wave of *déjà vu* come over him.

With a sweeping glance out at his audience, the Grand Master began to read from the book. Strange garbled syllables spilled from his lips as before, and once again Honoré could not understand a word.

Emily, however, obviously could. Honoré felt her tense beside him, and could see in her eyes that she understood the intent of the incantations, if not the words themselves.

‘Honoré!’ she hissed. ‘This is a summoning. They’re calling something up!’

‘I know,’ said Honoré. ‘Remember we told you about Venice? This is the same set-up. The same lousy thing happening all over again.’ But how did she *know*? There was something not right here, something jarring him, something he should be picking up on. Perhaps Emily *was* right. Maybe she *was* the Child of Time. Like she had said back in Venice, it did all sort of fit. However, he wasn’t yet prepared to believe that this was the case, that his Emily, the friend who had come into his life and helped him make sense of his own abilities, was ultimately the creation of the Sodality...

As the Grand Master spoke, the High Executioner moved behind him and picked up the chalice from the dais. She paraded with it up and down a couple of times, raising it to the heavens in time with the cadences of the Grand Master’s voice. Exactly as before.

Emily was watching everything with rapt attention, and Honoré pursed his lips, wondering how she was going to hold up to all this

Again, after about five minutes of incantations, bold gestures and chalice-raising, a cool breeze blew through the church, sending the candles flickering.

The Grand Master turned and placed the book back on the altar, then faced the assembled Sodality members and raised his arms. ‘As my will, so mote it be,’ he intoned in a strong voice.

Emily shuddered as the assembled acolytes replied, ‘As my will, so mote it be.’

The Grand Master closed his eyes and spoke a garbled string of words, ‘Dnaw onssa etihw sawece elfstib! Malelt tilad ahyram!’

The air shifted in the room, and spirals of dust ran across the floor.

‘Eko, Eko, Dæmos!’ said the Grand Master finally.

‘Eko, Eko, Dæmos,’ echoed the assembled people.

‘Eko, Eko, Mastho.’

‘Eko, Eko, Mastho.’

The echoes died away and there was silence for a moment. Then, with a slow but increasing rush of wind, a small tornado started up in the centre of the Cathedral. Honoré noticed that the acolytes who were

closest to it were pushing backwards. No doubt they had heard what had happened the last time. Perhaps some of them had even been present at the ceremony in Venice; Honoré doubted that any of them were actually time channellers or time sensitives themselves – after all, the Dæmon had demanded that they be wiped out, and he didn't for one minute believe what the Grand Master had said about finding a way to negate the abilities of those that remained loyal to the Sodality – but they could have been taken through time by their fellows before the purge began, or else travelled to the nexus point through the use of psionic science, as Maria had explained the last time they were here in the Cathedral – which seemed a very long time ago now... He concentrated on the figures of the Grand Master and the High Executioner and nodded to himself. The Grand Master's timesnake extended far into the past, so he had obviously travelled in time, but he appeared to be neither a time channeller nor a time sensitive. And the High Executioner? Her timesnake also extended far back into history, and far into the future as well, although it seemed to split and become confused in that direction. To his surprise, he sensed that she was a time channeller; so, at least one of them *had* survived within the Sodality's ranks.

As he watched the growing tornado of matter, Honoré found himself thinking about how the Sodality must have carried out their purge, using their loyal time channellers and time sensitives – while they still survived – to make subtle 'adjustments' to history: wipe out a father here, a mother there, prevent that couple from ever meeting... kill that baby. If you were ruthless enough, he supposed, then carrying out genocide in this way became just a matter of numbers.

But that wasn't all they had done. Honoré remembered the experiments – creatures like Abraxas; part-man, part-machine hybrids, created to kill and destroy wherever they went – and also the fugitives like Barnaby... on the run from the Sodality simply because they could travel in time and space. Then there had been that vast, unknowable time beast, harnessed by the Sodality to try to bring the more elusive

renegades to heel<sup>2</sup>... All under the command and control of the High Executioner. Someone who was herself one of these people she had been trying to exterminate.

He shook his head. Somehow it had to be stopped.

There was a roar of power, a muted *crump* of heavy hooves landing solidly on hard tiles, and suddenly the vast bulk of the Dæmon was stood below them.

It shook its massive, bullish head and looked around itself, laughing as it saw the assembled ranks of the Sodality before it, each man and woman gasping in awe at this presence among them. The people of this time weren't much better prepared than their predecessors – a couple of them collapsed in terror, and others let out muffled shrieks and gasps.

Honoré and Maria took an involuntary step backwards as the Dæmon appeared, but Emily, who had not seen the creature before, stood her ground, gazing with wide-eyed intensity at the demonic being that stood below her. 'Honoré,' she whispered. 'It's a... a...'

'We know,' said Maria. 'It's the same thing we saw in Venice.'

The Dæmon spoke, its voice deep and booming, powerful and assertive. 'Who dares to summon me a third time?' The great head swept the room, and the red eyes came to rest on the Grand Master and the High Executioner standing at the front. 'You. I know you...'

'Lord Dæmon...' began the Grand Master, but the High Executioner stepped forward, pushing him to one side.

'We summoned you as agreed.' Her voice was clear and loud. It was the voice of someone not used to being ignored.

'She sounds familiar,' whispered Emily to Honoré. 'Is it Mestizer...?'

Honoré was watching the scene below intently. 'I know what you mean, but I don't think it's her.'

The Dæmon spoke again. 'You... you with your plans and schemes.' It laughed, and the rumble filled the cavernous hall. 'Yes... as we agreed.' The creature towered over the Grand Master and the High Executioner, but was paying them little attention; instead, it was casting its gaze about

the Cathedral. ‘So...,’ it continued, distractedly. ‘Have you fulfilled your part of the bargain?’

Honoré frowned. ‘I think our goaty friend has something else on his mind,’ he muttered.

The High Executioner exchanged looks with the Grand Master. But their faces were hidden behind their masks.

‘We have.’ The High Executioner’s voice was clear. ‘We have rid the Earth of time sensitives and time channellers, as you instructed. They are all gone.’

‘All!’ The Dæmon’s bellow crashed around the chamber. The creature laughed again, a cruel, sly laugh. ‘What would you call yourself then, little one?’

‘I... I had to remain,’ explained the High Executioner. ‘For how else could I ensure that we fully carried out your bidding? And I cannot travel alone, without a time sensitive to accompany me.’

Honoré realised that the balance of power had shifted slightly between the Grand Master and the High Executioner in however long it had been for them since the summoning in Venice – perhaps a year or so in their own personal timescales. Whereas previously the Grand Master had been the guiding power behind the Sodality, now it seemed that the High Executioner held the reins.

The Dæmon seemed to consider this for a moment, but then it spoke again. ‘You lie.’

A wave of muttering swept through the crowd, and the Grand Master took a step backwards. The High Executioner however was not cowed. ‘I do not lie,’ she said. ‘Your will has been carried out, as we agreed.’

‘Oh, you are bold,’ taunted the Dæmon. ‘And yet, I can see that you are attempting to deceive me. How could you think I would not? You may have learned how to shield your thoughts from your fellows, using what little you understand of psionic science, but my race are the masters of that science! Here... here is proof of your failures!’

The creature muttered a string of alien syllables under its breath and a glowing transparent sphere materialised on the ground beside it. The crowd gasped as they saw what was inside, and after a moment, Emily too raised her hands to her mouth. It was Violet, Jimmie and Freia, sitting together on the floor of the bubble in a huddle, holding onto each other, and drained of all fight and energy.

Emily tried to step further forward to see whether they were hurt, but Honoré held her back in the shadows.

‘You see,’ boomed the creature. ‘These *children* were the results of your experimentation... and yet they live. I caught them crossing the time streams... travelling as you claimed that no-one could now do.’

‘Are they okay?’ gasped Emily, straining to see.

‘I think so,’ said Maria, ‘I can see their timesnakes and they are alive... For the moment.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Honoré.

‘Look closely,’ said Maria, holding Honoré’s arm as they gazed out over the assembled throng. ‘Look at the timesnakes of *everyone* there...’

Honoré looked, and was silent for a moment.

‘What?’ asked Emily. ‘What do you see?’

Honoré looked blankly at her. ‘Nothing.’

‘What do you mean *nothing*? Come on Honoré, *tell me*.’

‘I mean nothing. Nothing at all. No-one in this place has a future any more.’

The Dæmon looked around at the assembled Sodality members, and also at the Grand Master and the High Executioner standing on the dais at the front. A smile spread across its face. ‘So... you admit to your failure?’

The High Executioner glanced at the pathetic figures of the children, trapped in the force-bubble beside the Dæmon. She wished she had killed them all when she had had the chance. But back then she had been weak. Too weak to take the control she desired. It was only after the summoning in Venice, when her role had been upgraded from that of mere Chancellor to High Executioner, that she had felt she had the remit and the support to do what needed to be done. From that day forward she had been strong.

The only fly in the ointment was that annoying and elusive Dr Smith. It was a mystery to her how he had managed to wriggle from her grasp, but also, and more importantly, how he had managed to place nagging doubts in her mind. It was almost as if the man had been able somehow to see deep inside her soul... She shook her head to clear it. Why on Earth were these thoughts coming to her now, when all her attention needed to be focused on the matter in hand?

‘I... I admit it,’ she said at last. ‘There are still some at large who can travel in time and space. But these we can clear up in our own time, when we have the power to be able to achieve that. They do not hinder our plans one bit.’

The Dæmon regarded her. ‘So what would you do to prove yourself to me?’

She looked levelly at the creature. ‘What would you have me do, lord?’

It waited a long moment. ‘Kill him.’ It pointed a claw at the Grand Master.

‘What?’ The High Executioner glanced at her long-time co-conspirator in the schemes of the Sodality.

‘Kill him,’ repeated the Dæmon. ‘Prove that you have the strength and the spirit to lead your people.’

She considered his order. Seconds ticked by. And then she stepped away and turned to face the Grand Master, one of her hands tucked inside her robes.

‘Take off your mask,’ she instructed.

‘But...’ the man’s resolve was rapidly cracking.

‘Take. Off. Your. Mask.’ Her voice was steel.

He slowly lifted the goat skull from his head, revealing his scarred face. His eyes were darting to and fro, and his mouth was starting to quiver.

‘Thank you,’ the High Executioner said. She stepped forward, and in one smooth movement, thrust the knife that had appeared in her hand deeply into the Grand Master’s stomach. She twisted it viciously, and plunged her hand still deeper.

The Grand Master’s eyes closed and he sighed, air and blood bubbling from his mouth in a final exhalation. The High Executioner pushed him off the knife and he crumpled to the floor, his mask clattering down beside him. Then she carefully placed the knife on the altar before wiping her hands together, removing most of the gore but leaving them stained and pink.

The Dæmon watched all this impassively. ‘You are not a fool,’ it pronounced at last.

‘So, you are to bestow your powers on me?’ she asked, barely able to contain the excitement in her voice. This was her moment, the one she’d waited for all her life.

‘I had not finished!’ bellowed the Dæmon, eyes blazing red. ‘I was going to say... you are not a fool, and yet you have been the biggest fool of all!’

‘What...?’



The Dæmon laughed again. ‘Oh, you foolish, naïve humans. It is not you who have deceived me, but I who have deceived you!’

‘I... I don’t understand.’

‘The world has been deceived. The Sodality has been deceived. *You* have been deceived, High Executioner!’ Its laughter rang out around the inner dome of St Paul’s once more.

Standing in the shadows of the upper balcony, Honoré, Emily and Maria watched intently as the drama played out below them.

The Dæmon fell silent and crouched down before the High Executioner, its massive goat-like legs bending at all angles to bring its head level with hers.

‘You see, my bold, clever High Executioner, the creation of time sensitives and time channellers was, and always has been, fully in line with my race’s intentions for the Earth experiment.’

‘But... if that is so, then why did you order their deaths?’

The Dæmon Mastho continued to gaze at her, but she held her ground. She would not be cowed in what she had thought to be her moment of triumph, and her servants would not see her falter. ‘The ultimate aim of my race’s experiment has always been the creation of what you humans called the Child of Time. When I was summoned a thousand years ago in Venice, I sensed that, although you yourselves did not realise it, you had actually succeeded in that great endeavour; a Child of Time had been brought into being, but had yet to reach the level of maturity necessary to realise its power. In calling for all time sensitives and time channellers to be killed, my aim was to *flush out* the Child of Time. You are aware of the evolutionary principle of *survival of the fittest*, are you not? I knew her special abilities would enable her to survive your *purge*, alone amongst all time travellers – had you but succeeded in the task I gave you!’

The High Executioner shook her head. ‘But why? Why should the Dæmons need a Child of Time?’

‘We are a powerful race, but we are restricted to appearing only where and when we are summoned to appear by lesser mortals, at the

nexus points of history. We are bound by the laws of our own psionic science. But with a Child of Time within our grasp, we will finally be able to discover the secret of free movement through all time and space!' Mastho stood again, towering once more over the Sodality members gathered in the Cathedral. 'You have been manipulated into pursuing the same goal as us, unwittingly carrying out our work for us. How does that feel, little human?'

The Dæmon started to stalk across the tiled central floor of St Paul's. It stopped in the centre, directly under the main dome, and raised its clawed hands to the sky. 'And now the great experiment is at an end, and has been successful. The Earth will be spared destruction, and I shall depart, taking the Child of Time with me. The Dæmons' rule of time and space shall begin this day.'

Up on the balcony, Emily was growing increasingly concerned. This devil creature wanted the Child of Time... But that was her, wasn't it...? Was she to be taken by that creature? Separated from Honoré, the only friend she had ever had? She shrank away from the balustrade, hiding behind Honoré's arm in the hope that he could protect her, as he had done so many times in the past.

'It's okay, Emily,' he muttered absently. But she knew it wasn't. How could it be? She was about to be taken by a demon!

The massive beast below raised its head and looked directly at the point on the balcony where the three travellers were hiding. Its voice was raised in triumph. 'Now! Now I shall take the Child and return to Dæmos. Show yourself!'

Emily screamed, and Honoré bundled her backwards, away from Maria, who was phasing in and out of reality, pulsing with an electric blue light that sent the shadows scurrying. Maria raised a hand to Honoré, and Emily saw her mouth the words, 'Help me!' Then she vanished, only to reappear instantly down on the Cathedral floor directly before Mastho.

Honoré grabbed Emily's wrist. 'Look,' he urged. 'Look. *She* is the Child of Time. Not you.'

Emily looked, tears running down her cheeks. 'What? Maria? No! How can she be?' She'd been so sure it was her, so sure that this was the answer to the mystery of her life.

As they watched, Maria started to transform still further, like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon. She became bathed in ever brighter blue light, an inner radiance that illuminated her bones ice-white within electric-blue skin. The light grew and formed wing-like shapes around her, and she rose slowly up in the air before the Dæmon, her eyes closed and her face serene as the changes played out around her.

Everyone in the chamber was gazing up at her as she was transfigured, a white and blue angel floating in their midst. Even the Dæmon seemed impressed, standing motionless as it watched the creature, the result of millennia of planning and experimentation.

*This* was her purpose. *This* was the reward for all the pain and torture she had endured all her life. Maria felt her spirit soaring in the Cathedral, felt the souls of all the people who had ever worshipped there, ever given something of themselves to the stone and the marble. She absorbed all the memories, all the echoes of time, and became something greater than the sum of it all. She was so *alive*...

But there was something else. A sound. A faint grinding sound in the air that Honoré had heard once before. He tore his gaze from the vision filling the centre of the Cathedral, and saw a pulsing blue light emanating from an alcove over to one side. As he watched, a gangly, balding man dressed in a velvet jacket stepped tentatively out from the shadows.

Honoré recognised him instantly, although he had not set eyes on him for some two years. 'It's *him*,' he whispered, his jaw dropping with astonishment. He felt as if he had been hit by a thunderbolt.

At the same time, the High Executioner caught sight of the newcomer and screamed his name in frustration: 'Dr Smith!'

She reached up and pulled the goat-skull mask from her head, throwing it impotently at him in her fury. The action revealed her face to the watching crowd.

Honoré stared in utter amazement. For the woman standing below them on the dais was Emily.

Emily's eyes opened wide. She could not take this in. She could not. She was this person. This killer. This murderess. This slaughterer of innocents. She was the High Executioner. No. No. No!

She started to keen quietly to herself, muttering under her breath. But it all fit. She was the one who loved death and disaster. The dreams, the pleasure at the deaths. No. It couldn't be her. But it *was* her. It was *her*. No.

'No. No. No no no no no no...'

Honoré was trying to hold on to her, but she squirmed from his grasp. 'I... I'm sorry, Honoré... I can't... can't...'

'It's okay, Emily,' said Honoré in a placatory tone, carefully. 'Nothing will happen to you.'

'But you... you don't understand,' she sobbed, her eyes wide and flickering from side to side. 'I'm *her*. I'm a *monster*.'

'Emily, listen to me. She is not you. You're a different person in every way.'

Emily looked over the balcony at the figure below, who was standing looking from Mastho to the glowing angel to Dr Smith in turn, unsure which of them posed the greatest threat to her at that moment.

'I'm sorry, Honoré,' she said, turning back to look at him with large, tear-filled eyes. 'If that is who I am... I don't want to be me!'

Honoré grabbed her arm as she tried to clamber on top of the balustrade. 'No! Emily! That's not the answer...' He desperately tried to find the right words, but sensed that this time he might fail. There was no denying the evidence before their eyes – Emily and the High Executioner were one and the same person.

Emily struggled furiously, but he hung on, glancing below to the massive form of the Dæmon. The creature seemed to be looking about it with some amusement. Its voice boomed out, drowning the hubbub that had taken over the crowd. ‘Humans!’ it spat. ‘I feel that this planet may be one of the first we return to for further experimentation. But now it is time.’

The creature moved its hand towards Maria, who was floating serenely in the air before it. ‘Come, my Child.’

Maria’s eyes snapped open. Cold and ice blue. She regarded the Dæmon for a second, and then spoke, her voice calm and mellifluous. ‘I think not.’

Mastho was not amused. ‘What?’ the creature growled.

‘You may have brought about my creation. But you do not have me. And you cannot control me.’

‘Oh, my Child,’ chided the Dæmon. ‘Even if you jump through time, you cannot get away. You are within my power, and I can now track and follow you wherever you go.’

Maria smiled. Once. Sharply. ‘I wouldn’t be so sure about that, if I were you.’

And she vanished in an immense flash of white light.

The Dæmon roared with frustration and lashed out with its arm, catching the High Executioner a glancing blow to the head and sending her crashing to the tiled floor. Dr Smith scurried over to her prone form and gently lifted it in his arms. He looked around and his eyes caught those of Honoré, watching from the balcony above as he continued to struggle with Emily. Dr Smith nodded his head at Honoré, then carried the High Executioner’s prone figure back into the alcove from which he had emerged. Honoré knew what would be waiting for him there: the Cabinet of Light. Sure enough, the sound of meshing gears started up again, and the faint blue light pulsed out into the body of the Cathedral before fading away.

# The End – One

London, 1949

Fully in control of her new powers at last, Maria, the true Child of Time, sped through the time vortex. She was not following a random course, but trying to confuse the Dæmon, whose psionic hooks she could feel tugging at her, tracking her.

Her mind was in turmoil. She had been transformed, gone from having nothing to having the whole of time and space as her playground. But she knew that she could never play. Her life had been one of hardship, fear and pain. Captured by the Sodality in Venice, forced to undergo the ritual scarring, the etching of cabbalistic symbols and sigils into her skin so deeply that she could feel the knives scraping on her bones. And the bleeding, the pain and the itching of healing. Followed by more scarring... Time after time, month after month, her spirit broken and abused. Nothing for her. No future.

But now, she *was* the future. She had the power to save the world. She smiled inwardly to herself at that. Not many people have the chance to save the world. But at what cost? She knew the Dæmon was right: it could follow her and it could use her. She could not escape. Except...

There was an escape. The only escape possible. One she'd prayed for so many times down the years. One she'd once wished would come quickly, so that her life of pain and abuse could end. But her tormentors had been clever. She had been watched, searched, her nails kept clipped, her teeth capped. There had been nothing sharp left within her reach, nothing to use as a weapon. No way she could have escaped her life of hell.

But then she *had* escaped. One night, in her bed, recovering from the latest in a long succession of tortures, she had phased out, falling unconscious with the shock of the time/space transfer. She had come to

in the relative safety of St Paul's, one thousand years in the future, where the time jumps had started to settle down into the random pattern of flipping between there and the Venice of her birth. The urge to end it all had passed; but she had still thought of it from time to time.

And now she realised that it was the only way. She had to do it in order to save the world. The thought brought tears to her eyes and a lump to her throat. She idly wondered if she still had eyes or throat in the conventional sense, but supposed that she must.

Suddenly she sensed a time ship in the vortex with her.

Excellent. Maybe this would throw the Dæmon off her scent long enough. She locked onto the box-like object and followed its path through history. The years flicked by. She found she could sense them passing. All ages and all times accessible through the striating wonder that was the time vortex. She sensed that she was slowing, and then arriving. The familiar sense of self was returning. Of solid ground beneath her feet. She was at her destination.

Maria looked around. She was in a house. It was dark. The year? 1949. Maria knew that instinctively. She looked up and found that she could see moonlight and stars through the shattered roof. The house was badly damaged, the timbers ripped and unstable. At her feet was a ragged hole in the floorboards, leading down into darkness. Something had smashed into this house and partly demolished it.

Maria stepped around the hole and looked out of one of the windows. Across the street she could see a battered sign swinging in the light wind:  
SPITALFIELDS MARKET

So she was in London. A greenish fog was starting to roll in and blot out the moonlight. All the better, she thought to herself.

At that moment, she felt the Dæmon tugging at her. Its psionic claws deeply embedded within her, urging her back.

She raised her hands and closed her eyes.

It was time. This was for her friends. For Honoré and Emily. For Roberto. For all the children.

It ended now.

With a focused flash of electric-blue energy, she lashed out at the crumbling and unstable remains of the house around her. With a loud creak, masonry started to tumble inwards. A beam from the room fell and caught her a glancing blow on the head. She fell, and didn't feel a secondary impact from a large chunk of brickwork that collapsed in on her.

She was dead before her body hit the shattered rubble at the bottom of the house, her electric blue aura fading away and leaving only her frail form etched with cabbalistic runes.

Bricks and woodwork continued to rain down on her body for a few moments, pouring dust down on her remains.

Maria was at peace at last.



# The End – Two

London, 2586

As Honoré continued to struggle with Emily, who still seemed determined to throw herself from the balcony, he saw out of the corner of his eye that the Dæmon was stomping about the floor below, causing the terrified Sodality members to flee for their lives. ‘What is this?’ it roared. ‘Why can I not find her? Why can I not track her movements?’ It paced forwards, turned and took a step to the side, head cocked, for all the world as though it was trying to tune into the strongest signal on a radio. It paused for a second. ‘Ah... I have her.’ Then, suddenly, its face fill with rage. ‘No. It cannot be!’ It slammed one fist down on the dais, cracking it and raising a plume of red dust. ‘Her life force is no more! I am too late!’

The creature raised its hands to its head and started to stagger about, roaring in pain. A low rumble filled the air, and those few acolytes who remained raced for the exit.

Honoré suddenly heard a loud scraping sound from close by on the balcony and saw that one of the stone gargoyles had finally found them. He held onto Emily for all his worth and tried to drag her away from the approaching creature. But, as the Dæmon’s cries from below grew louder, so the red light of the gargoyle’s eyes started to dim, and eventually it slowed and stopped. It had reverted to stone.

Honoré returned his attention to Emily, who started to scream and cry and lash out at him with renewed vigour. Eventually he could hold her no more: she broke free, dodged away and stood facing him, breathless and tear streaked. She reached out and touched the now-immobile gargoyle with a look of wonder on her face, then shook her head wildly.

‘I can’t do this Honoré. I can’t be me any more.’

‘Emily, listen.’

‘No, you listen. All these years, all these adventures, and all I ever wanted was to know who I was. We were a great team, Honoré. The best. But I didn’t know – how could I have known? – what I really was.’

He watched her carefully, gauging the distance between them. Could he reach her in time? He’d never seen her so purposeful, so determined.

Emily sniffed, wiped her nose on her sleeve and shot a quick glance across to the balustrade. Her eyes darted back to Honoré again before he could make a move towards her. ‘You don’t understand. You don’t know what it’s like to lose yourself... and then find yourself again, only to realise that you are a hateful, evil creature who should never have been born!’

She was shouting now, tears pouring from her eyes, and Honoré winced at the pain he could see in his friend’s face. Pain so intense that it was tearing him up.

‘Honoré,’ said Emily, gulping back her tears. ‘Know this. I... I love you.’ And with a jump, she sailed over the balustrade and into the air high above the shattered floor of St Paul’s Cathedral.

For Honoré it was as though time had shifted into slow motion. As Emily jumped, so he lunged forward, his clutching hand missing her leg by inches. He cried out, a long, slow, drawn out ‘Noooooooo!’, as he saw her glide out into mid-air and start to fall.

His body crashed hard against the balustrade and he reached out his arms as though he could somehow bridge the widening gap that separated them. But she was too far away.

She was gone.

He felt his world crumbling, turning to ashes and dust as he watched Emily, his Emily, falling away from him.

And time stopped.

Honoré blinked.

What had happened? He looked down from the balcony. Everything was still and silent, frozen in time. Emily's outstretched form was suspended in mid air. Even Mastho the Dæmon was motionless.

Then, one thing moved among the dust below. A small girl crawled out from behind a stone pillar.

Violet.

The Dæmon had been distracted, and the force bubble containing the children had dissipated, releasing them. Now Violet was moving purposefully across the floor, her face tight and focused. Looking up, she raised one arm and held out her hand, but it wasn't Honoré she was directing it at – it was Emily. The girl got to her feet, and he could see the strain on her face. She looked ill and weak.

Concentrating hard, Violet gently lowered her hand, palm downwards. As she did so, Emily's body started to descend gently towards the ground.

Honoré made his way around to the spiral staircase, hurried down to the ground floor and went to stand beneath Emily's slowly falling form. He held out his arms, and she came to rest in them like an autumn leaf dropping from the tree. As Violet's fist closed, he felt Emily's weight settle.

'Thank you,' said Honoré. 'Though that doesn't seem really adequate, somehow.'

Violet's eyes were a glistening black, but she blinked once and they cleared back to her normal one-blue, one-violet gaze. 'Emily is a good friend,' said Violet. 'She saved our lives, so now I've saved hers.'

'What about you?' asked Honoré. 'Where will you go?'

Violet looked over to where Jimmie and Freia were waiting for her. 'We are free now,' she said. 'And that is thanks to you.' She stretched up on tiptoes and kissed Honoré on the cheek. Then she stepped back and waved her arm out at the motionless tableau before her.

Time jumped back on the rails. The Dæmon's cries of pain and rage returned, the fleeing Sodality members continued their race for the doors, and Emily opened her eyes.

‘Hi there,’ he growled.

‘Hi,’ she said, slightly confused. ‘Why am I... Why are you...?’

‘Let’s worry about that later,’ he said. ‘For the moment, let’s get out of here.’

Emily smiled and allowed him to put her down and help her onto her feet. ‘I feel odd,’ she said. ‘As though my memories are back, but I feel somehow detached from them.’

Honoré grinned. ‘I think that’s a parting gift from Violet.’

He raised a hand in farewell, and Emily turned to see the three gifted children smiling broadly. They raised their hands too, then faded out of existence.

Honoré focussed in on the timesnakes of the acolytes racing for the exit. ‘They’re all back to normal,’ he muttered. ‘The future has been changed.’

‘What?’ asked Emily, still confused.

‘The timesnakes. When I looked before, they all terminated. Now, they all extend into the future. Whatever it was that was going to happen to wipe out all these people has been prevented. Time has been changed.’

One of the running Sodality guards veered towards them as he raced for the exit. Honoré grabbed Emily’s hand. ‘Here’s our ride,’ he said.

As the running man came within grabbing distance, Honoré made contact with him, Emily looked into his eyes, and they vanished from sight, travelling back along the man’s timesnake to an earlier time – any time, did it really matter when? – and place, where there was no Dæmon, no collapsing Cathedral, and they could recuperate and, eventually, make their way home.

In St Paul’s, Mastho writhed in increasing agony. Its species was powerful, but governed by the laws of its own psionic science: once any individual Dæmon had been summoned for the third time, it had either to bequeath its powers to a suitable candidate and leave, or else destroy the experiment it had been assigned to monitor. There was no third

option. Mastho had intended to transfer his powers to the captive Child of Time, binding her to him and returning with her to the home planet, Dæmos, but she had outwitted him.

Like Azal, the previous monitor assigned to Earth, Mastho had failed, and was now being consumed by the psionic energies it had once commanded. Roaring with rage and frustration, the Dæmon started to glow with an incandescent white light, then finally self-destructed, detonating like a huge bomb in the middle of St Paul's, bringing the roof crashing down and razing London's once-proud monument to the ground, forever.

# The Beginning – Night and Fog

London 1949

It was a typical East End fog; it wasn't white.

Like all true Londoners, and despite what he saw at the flicks, Cranfield knew the fog was *green*. It was a damp, tubercular, reassuring shade. For years the night sky had glowed livid pink, shot through with dust and flame, though that was fading now. With time the tiny clumps of black or red flowers that bloomed on the rubble would die out. Cranfield was a young man, he hoped to be pounding this beat twenty, thirty years on. His father had walked these streets when the first tentative bombs fell; his great-uncle had hunted the Ripper and the Limehouse Phantom nearby; he was walking in their footsteps and in the labyrinth of fogs he could almost believe their paths would cross, three generations of policemen at the same crossroads.

There came the peal of a bell from Shoreditch, hairs prickled on the back of his neck, a memory of sirens and all-clear whistles and the chime calling all hands to help pull bodies from the river.

His beat took him past Spitalfields Market, which was shut up for the night though the gate still thronged with people. The church opposite attracted them like doodlebugs. It was bone-white, yellowed with neglect then scorched black by a Luftwaffe handprint that might not fade for generations. To one side there was a scrub of grass where vagrants slept under newsprint blankets, though Cranfield couldn't imagine the dreams the church would give them. By day, when the streets filled with human heat, old women would sit on the steps beneath the angular spire and suck green oranges and spit the pips onto the street to mock austerity. Cranfield felt great sympathy for them, the living public. By night the stones absorbed all the heat and people stayed huddled round pub doorways till closing time, then at the market gate. Ragged around

the gate were the dark façades of houses, pitted with gaps where other homes had stood until, one night, they had been transformed into cairns of brick rubble and human pulp.

Outside the market a woman was singing, a broken voice, eerily. Cranfield couldn't see where it was coming from. They were mainly women here, in their clusters. Vagrants stood shivering by a fire on the scrub. A dirt-faced boy ran in the street, grinning, clipped past Cranfield and the policemen instinctively felt like lashing out, but checked himself. There was a woman squatting on the steps, older than she looked, wrapped in a dark shawl but bare-headed; she sold flowers by day and had a flower's name but he couldn't place it right now. There was an old soldier beside her, tall and heavy in his black cap and coat; he turned to look at Cranfield with a long dead slab-face that probably hadn't twitched since 1918. Cranfield tipped the rim of his hat and nodded automatically, but the eye that watched him was white and sightless.

He moved through them, watching them bristle as he passed. Overhead was a shiny bomber's moon; they could all feel it, despite the fog. There was a patch of darkness on the far side of the church. The girl came stumbling out of that, a splash of violent pink in the midst of green. Cranfield wasn't the first to see her, it was the commotion that made him turn, but he was the closest and when she lost her footing he was there to catch her.

A few days later he would barely remember what she looked like. There was just the memory of her as she shambled towards him, taking each step as though it were her first, wearing nothing but a baggy pink pair of pyjamas. Not silk, not cotton, not even nylon, just pink and shiny in the moonlight. She was barefoot, her feet were blue. The pink pyjamas hung crumpled on her wiry frame. She was small enough for Cranfield to mistake her for a child, though once he got close he realised she was probably in her twenties. She was a skinny pale thing, she shivered in the autumn fog, but she looked hurt rather than cold. Her eyes told him that – they had a grey traumatised sheen, *witness-eyes*. He could tell, just by looking, that her grasp on the everyday had been

ripped away, and savagely.

It had been over four years since Cranfield held anyone like this. Then it had been a girl no older than twelve, and he cradled her in his arms as the life left her body. You heard stories of *Blitz miracles* all the time, unlikely survivors, but he had never seen one with his own eyes. This woman wasn't going to die. Her stare leapt wildly round the faces of the gathered crowd. He could feel delicate bones through her pyjamas.

'What's happened to you?' he asked. She was smiling. He tried a more basic approach: 'What's your name?'

'I don't remember,' she said. 'What year is this? I don't remember the year.' Someone mumbled it, embarrassed. The girl nodded and grinned. It was hard to tell if she understood the date. Cranfield thought *shell-shock*, though that made no sense. She had a Blitz-twitch. There were no signs of violence on her face, on her clothes.

'I don't know who I am.' Her eyes opened wider and she grabbed his uniform frantically. 'Police...' she said, and again he knew she was a victim.

'Are you hurt?'

'I remember *light*,' she insisted. 'I was going to die! There was so much light.'

She held open palms out for Cranfield to inspect, as if she'd been clutching the light in them, but her hands were just dark, bruised pink. A chill rippled through him anyway. Someone else was kneeling beside him, the flower-seller, holding out a worn out bloom, so blackened it was impossible to tell what it had ever been. The girl took it mutely, keeping her mouth tight shut as if holding back a scream.

Then her eyes closed and her head lolled back but she was only asleep.

In the fog-wreathed shadows, two figures watched as Cranfield helped Emily away. The flower seller returned to sit with her wares and the cracked voice continued with its broken melody.

The two figures, a large, dark-skinned man with a neatly trimmed beard in a long black leather coat and a petite, long-haired girl wrapped



in a warm shawl, turned and hugged each other long and hard. The girl was crying gently and the man was struggling to hold himself together, to look strong for her.

This was where it had all started. And this was where it ended. The house where Maria had died was just around the corner, her body due to be found in two years' time or so, setting in motion a train of events through time and space, but all leading back to this time, this place.

The man put a friendly arm around his younger companion, and together they walked away, the green fog swirling around their legs and finally swallowing them up.

Out there in London, the future was waiting for them.

## About The Authors

George Mann was born in Darlington, County Durham, in 1978. He has been reading science fiction since he first managed to lay his hands on a copy of *The War of the Worlds* on his eleventh birthday.

*The Human Abstract* for Telos Publishing was his first work of fiction, and *The Severed Man* his second. More recent novels include *The Affinity Bridge*, *The Osiris Ritual* and *Ghosts of Manhattan*, as well as numerous short stories, novellas and an original *Doctor Who* audiobook. He has edited a number of anthologies including *The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction*, *The Solaris Book of New Fantasy* and a retrospective collection of Sexton Blake stories, *Sexton Blake, Detective*.

David J Howe wrote the book **Reflections: The Fantasy Art of Stephen Bradbury** for Dragon's World Publishers and the screenplay for the video drama **Dæmos Rising** and has contributed short fiction to **Peeping Tom**, **Dark Asylum**, **Decalog**, **Perfect Timing**, **Dark Horizons** and **Shrouded by Darkness: Tales of Terror**, and factual articles to **James Herbert: By Horror Haunted** (Hodder & Stoughton) and **The Radio Times Guide to Science Fiction** (2001, BBC).

# The Time Hunter Series



TIME

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