



## **I Am The Box**

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# Chapter 1

## The Box

Sol bought the box from a local antique shop, on a rainy Saturday morning. He paid twenty-five pounds and thought he had got a real bargain. The dealer had shown him the box, marvelled at its intricate carved sides; the swirls and eddies of wood, some of them looking almost like faces, teased from the block by an obviously immensely talented woodworker. He ooh-ed and ahh-ed at the burnished brass corners and mother of pearl inlays, while Sol glanced from tables to chairs, from mirrors and broken picture frames to a particularly stained and unattractive watercolour, yawning. He bought the box because he thought it was just the thing to sit his bedside lamp on. The dealer told him it was 18<sup>th</sup> Century. He wondered aloud at paying only twenty-five pounds for anything over 200 years old. The dealer shrugged and dropped the price to twenty.

The traffic was snarled in the winding streets all the way back to his house, and it took more than twice the usual 15 minutes to drive from the centre of town. The rain continued to pour and steam built up on the insides of the car windows, until Sol was forced to wind down the window and drive with his head lolling out like a particularly wet and wretched dog. The box sat across the back seat, unperturbed by the visibility problems.

By the time he reached his house, the rain had reached tropical ferocity. It seemed to bounce three feet off the pavement and as he rushed to the front door, key in hand, head bowed, a small river tore down his path, the debris of months of garden neglect collecting across his shoes. He opened the front door slower than he would have liked, key knocking the brass plate that covered the keyhole several times before finding the hole, and almost fell through the door in his haste. He wasn't a man normally given to introspection, but his cheeks reddened slightly and he glanced over his shoulder in what he hoped was an easy movement, hoping no one had seen his panicked entrance. He pushed the door shut

with his foot and leaned against it. It was then that he realised the box still sat on the passenger seat of his car, and that he hadn't locked the doors.

'Shit,' he said. Then he laughed. Anyone willing to steal his car or the box in this weather was welcome to it.

He kicked off his shoes, cursing the mess on the hall carpet. Rain fell from his clothes and hair and wet the carpet further, spotting a few pieces of post that had been dropped through the door while he was out. He picked them up, and although three out of the four were obviously junk mail, he shook them dry and placed them next to the telephone.

'Shit', he said again.

He checked the answering machine for messages, listened to one from his mother and deleted it. He told the machine that he still wasn't sure when he was going to get married and provide her a grandchild (or maybe two) but he wasn't going to marry someone his mother had picked, and certainly not someone he was told about via his answering machine. He contemplated unplugging the phone, but decided against it and walked slowly to the kitchen. Putting the kettle on to boil, he grabbed a tea towel from the back of a chair and furiously dried his hair.

Five minutes later, sitting in his living room, hair a tangled, damp mess, strong coffee in one hand and a piece of toast in the other, Sol finally relaxed. The rain seemed to slow with his heartbeat and he thought that he would leave the house to lock his car and bring in his recent purchase as soon as his coffee was drunk. He considered switching on his ancient radio, but was increasingly unimpressed by the banality it spat at him these days. He didn't own a television. He wondered idly whether he was missing anything in his life. The thought remained unresolved.

As he set his cup down on one of the old fake leather drink-mats his mother had bought him as a moving in present (the one and only time she had been to the house), the phone shrilled from the hall. He frowned, adopting that slightly paranoid air that comes over people when they hear a phone ringing. For Sol, nine times out of ten, a phone ringing was bad news.

'Who..?' he started, mentally counting off a list of the people who he expected it to be. His mother had already rung today. His list ended.

The phone stopped abruptly. He picked up the receiver and dialled 1-4-7-1. The call was from a number he didn't recognise. He frowned more deeply and hesitantly dialled the number.

His frown smoothed as he listened and nodded.

‘Ah yes, I see, thanks very much for calling,’ he said as he hung up. It had been the antique dealer. Apparently there was a key for his box and the dealer had found it when cleaning the space the box had taken up in his shop. Sol resolved to drive down and pick it up right then before he had his lunch.

The rain had left a clean stripe down the centre of the garden path, mini-drifts of sticks and flower heads left by the flood lining the path. The air had a damp yet optimistic feeling, the sun was warm and the smell of recent rain and wet foliage was one that Sol treasured in his garden. He breathed deeply, his step a little lighter.

The traffic had eased and the sun shone fitfully through the remaining cloud cover. Sol had to keep his window open to clear the condensation that always built up inside his car when it rained. His spirits, somehow, were high. He pulled up outside the shop and pressed the switch that set his hazard lights flashing. He ran into the shop and after a frustrating five-minute conversation with the antique dealer, from which he tried numerous times to extract himself, he made it back to his car, key clutched tightly in his left hand, while he juggled his main set of keys with his other. Eventually he managed to grasp the car key and let himself back into the car.

For the first time, he noticed the smell. It came from the box, he was sure of that, and he thought it must be the damp condition, bringing out the aroma of the wood. It was not an unpleasant smell, rather like deep green olives and coconut oil mixed with smoke and the dark musty smell of ripe earth. He turned and looked at the box, and saw for the first time how the grain of the wood seemed to glow in the patchy sunlight. He smiled to himself and breathed deeply.

He threw the key lightly onto the seat beside him and it seemed to chime as it fell across the upholstery. Sol checked his mirrors and pulled sharply away from the shop. He made it home in ten minutes and after pushing the key deep into his pocket, carried the box carefully up the path, setting it down to rest on the toes of his shoes as he unlocked the front door. He set it down on the couch in his front room, and sat down on the chair opposite. He pulled the key from his pocket and turned it slowly in his hands, relishing the sound it made as it travelled through his calloused fingers, like a distant wind chime. He shut his eyes.

Instantly images filled his head. Dark, rent flesh, a butcher’s shop of images with flashing, silver blades, spurting redness and screaming mouths stretched to impossible size in their terror.

He thrust himself back against the chair. The key fell from his hand and he at once opened his eyes and emitted a low keening sound from deep in his throat. His eyes flashed wildly.

'Jesus.' he said, running a hand full-palmed across his face. He glanced down at the fallen key, gleaming dully in the thick pile of the carpet. A nervous chuckle sounded impossibly loud in the quiet of his house. He forced a laugh, anything to break the silence.

The warmth, the quiet, the heaviness of toast and coffee that lay in his belly; he convinced himself it was these things, these normal everyday things that had lulled him into a mid-morning nap, and that his tired brain had concocted the awful nightmare images. He reached for the key, aware of the wind chime sounding in his ears again. He picked it up.

The wind chime became a thousand chimes, a hundred thousand; all of them ringing in a wind that he could not feel. He shut his eyes, screwed his face in an attempt to shut out the noise. It was futile, for the sound doubled, then trebled, and he thrust his hands over his ears. The earthy, olive smell of the box wafted to him, and he opened his eyes to look.

The box sat where he had left it. Around it, around *him*, the world had become a mess of nothingness, as if he lived in a watercolour painting and the artist had decided to wash everything out. His living room ran like it was liquid and behind the wallpaper and red brick and mortar was darkness. He moaned involuntarily, a dead sound, a helpless sound, as his world was washed from existence and all that was left was the box. Its dark wood gleamed malevolently, and Sol had presence of mind to question his thought then. It was a *box*. Boxes don't do anything, let alone do them malevolently. He forced his hand open and the key fell once again to the carpet. It has left a red impression in his palm, which he stared at.

'When I look up,' he said to himself, his voice echoing and distant, 'my living room *will* be back where it belongs.' He looked.

It was.

And the box stood open.

## Chapter 2

### Friends and Sinners

Strange sounds issued from it, distant keenings, howls that beat into the softness of his brain. He covered his ears against the noise, but it penetrated deeper. He stood, and stepped onto the key, which felt warm under his feet. For a fleeting moment he unstopped his ears to pick it up, and discovered that the sounds had ceased. Almost absent-mindedly, he retrieved the key and pocketed it, and turned his attention to the opened box. As he drew nearer, he theorised that the sounds had not stopped, but only that he had become used to them, and now they played a gently lapping tide across his anxiety. His eyes drew closed, dreamlike, and he smiled.

His hand reached toward the box and fluttered like a bird in a wind. The noise from the box intensified and Sol opened his eyes to see a swirling mass begin to solidify on the dark interior of the box. The opening to the box itself seemed to have grown and the mass grew with it. He murmured some unintelligible word at the sight of it, and began to reach further inside the confines of the box. The mass grew darker, more real somehow, and flashes of gold light began to appear on the surface. Its shape was not firm however, switching from oval to sphere to star and every shape in between.

The noises, now louder and clearly audible as voices (in choir, in jubilation, in terror?), beckoned him in, and even as he tried to thwart the box's obvious intentions (he had long ago given up any thought to why or how the box was doing what it was doing), he fell forward into the yawning darkness, that impossibly, but absolutely, swallowed him.

He had time and faculties enough to wonder at this situation he found himself in and then darkness overtook all. The noises did not abate however, and voices joined voices joined voices until the choir was gargantuan. He felt warm wetness on his cheeks and it could have been tears or blood. By degrees, light filtered into his consciousness and

afforded him some knowledge of his surroundings, and allowed his mind to make some sense of things.

It seemed he stood on wooden floorboards but it was only as he looked down to confirm this that he felt them under him. His feet were bare, and the slightest movement upon the floor broke open the skin on them, so that he shed tiny rivulets of scarlet onto the warped grain. There was no pain however. Somehow, he accepted all of this, and as he looked skyward (for the room in which he stood was so vast that the ceiling was out of sight completely) he accepted the presence of the seething mass that had drawn him here, swirling and knotting itself into a hundred thousand nightmare configurations. Only now it seemed to have shed the confines of the box into which he had fallen, and was of monstrous size, easily a hundred metres across, with clouds of gray and brown and black ebbing across its surface, held together one minute and the next thrown violently apart by shafts of golden lightning. The sum of this movement was nothing less than terrifying and as Sol stared into its depth, his pained and terrorised voice became one among many that was still the only sound here.

As in a daze, he backed slowly away from the mass, but it was so large now that it was forever above him. He sat heavily, and felt the skin on his legs and buttocks splitting, but again there was no pain. A warm wetness spread across his thighs and he tore his gaze away from the sight above him to look. The mass gave off a light, but it was a sickly glow, turning everything in its scope a dirty gray. The stain on his jeans was black and he knew it was blood. He touched a finger to it.

As his fevered mind allowed him to grasp at some invented logic to his present state, he began to smell the deep green olive and earth smell that had signalled the start of this episode. He imagined that he had fallen and hit his head on the rim of the box perhaps, and was dreaming this fugue state. The feeling of panic and loss was slowly leaving him, as the choir of voices did. A calm washed across him, such as he had never felt. He clutched his hands together and moved slowly in a circle to better assess his position.

The swirling mass of energy above his head now occupied every horizon. He could still see the grey, grainy floorboards beneath his feet, but of ceiling and walls there was no sign. He had the impression that he could walk for a lifetime with the seething nightmare for a constant companion and never reach the room's (if that is what he was in) extremes. The thought chilled him and elated him in equal measure. He thought he had been tricked into thinking that silence pervaded, for he began to

hear cracklings and hissing sighs all around. They surely came from above him, the golden lightning flashes punctuating the sound until it achieved a measure of rhythm. He understood suddenly that they were the sounds of it growing.

It struck him then how quickly he had shed the confines of rational thought. How long ago it seemed that he had drunk coffee and run through the rain. He shrugged off this sad and ultimately destructive train of thought and began to walk.

It seemed he walked for days. His feet bled, and on occasion when the pain became too intense he stopped and sat. The skin on his legs was healing, and no new blood had soaked his jeans. He was thankful for that. Always, the seething mass accompanied him, its roiling voice stopping Sol from thinking too hard about his situation. Then all sound ceased and the loss in his head was almost painful.

'Hello,' said a voice.

Sol's fear prevented him from anything but a barked reply. It seemed so long since he had heard any spoken word other than the cacophony of screams from above.

He turned to face the speaker.

A small creature stood there, more simian than human, but with a small upturned mouth, bristling with silver whiskers and a blue cap slung low over his brow that made him look like a fisherman. He wore dirty dungarees and with nothing on his feet, Sol could see that fur grew to the ends of his toes. A whip of a tail curled around one ankle, its end twitching.

'Who are you?' Sol managed at length. His voice was hoarse, and he wondered whether his voice had joined the thousands for his entire walk.

'Danté,' said the creature. He stood as if waiting on a reply, and when Sol gave none, he coughed and the whiptail switched ankles. Sol could have sworn he heard its passage through the hot air, even above the noise.

'Wanna get you away from that,' the creature said, motioning upwards with a tilt of its head. 'Never seen it so big.'

He beckoned and ran in the opposite direction, his gait light and altogether non-human. Sol figured he had no choice but to follow.

'It's not for you, y'see,' Danté shouted over his shoulder as they ran. Sol kept pace, just, and soon felt his lungs burning. He ignored the cryptic comment, concentrated on matching the creature's speed.

Soon they came to a door set into one wall. Sol had not seen it coming, and indeed, it only seemed to waver into existence once Danté came close to it.

'It's protected by a shimmer,' he explained. 'Keeps me from going up there. Without it, you'd never find home, and run forever in this place.' Sol noticed the creature never looked at the mass, which was still in every corner of his vision. Golden rods of lightning suddenly arced downwards, striking the floor and leaving scorched debris in its wake. Sol was sure that it had struck where they had been standing. He shuddered and followed the creature through the door. It slammed behind him, and as he heard and felt the shimmer hide them from existence, so he felt the pull and the noise of the mass disappear. A sickly feeling doubled him over, and he squeezed his eyes shut against it. He rubbed his ears and his eyes, unwilling to open them and admit to anything that he saw here.

'We call it the Wrath,' Danté explained.

'We?' asked Sol.

'We. As in us. As in the guards of this place. Guards o' the Wrath.'

It made no sense to Sol, even as a dream. He shook his head.

'What do you guard? That thing?' he gestured to the door.

'God, no. The Wrath does at it pleases. As *he* pleases.' He didn't furnish Sol with a name. 'We guard this *place* for when people like you come here. Wrong people, innocent people.' His tone had taken on a dark edge, and Sol went cold at the word *innocent*. Was something about to happen? Something more? Something that shouldn't happen to him, but that *would* happen because he was innocent and had no way of stopping it?

'Don't worry,' Danté quickly said. 'You'll be okay now ole Danté's got you. What is your name, anyway?'

'Sol.'

'Solomon?' the creature asked. 'Solomon and Danté!' He nodded his approval, but Sol wasn't sure of what he approved.

'Just Sol.'

Danté raised his hands as if in supplication, and wrapped his tail a little tighter around his ankle. 'Okay, okay. No offence meant.'

'Sorry,' said Sol. 'It's just that...'

He let the sentence trail.

'I know, I know. The Wrath can do that to an innocent.'

'What in hell is it?' Sol asked, softening to this creature.

'Exactly that. Hell. Or at least *his* representation of it. I don't suppose Hell as such exists anymore, what with the state of things Earthly.

There'd be no separating it, eh?' He laughed at his little joke. Sol remained quiet. 'Anyway, it is a magnet, if you like, for all of,' at this he gestured upwards, 'you know. You lot. Wrongdoers, evil-bringers, death-deliverers. What I like to call Society. There's a few innocents, like you, that don't belong here, never will, but for most, this is it.'

'Who is *he*?' Sol asked.

'All in good time, all in good time. Fancy a drink?'

'I'm not sure I understand all this. I was just...I...can't remember what I was doing before this, actually. I don't understand.' Sol looked round for a chair, and finding none, bent and sat cross-legged on the floor. Danté joined him, although he had considerably less far to bend.

The creature huffed. 'Look, it's like this.'

Absurdly, he found himself settling to listen.

'Society sins. It's the way it is. Year on year, decade upon decade, Society will find new and unimaginably unpleasant ways to commit sin. Now don't get me wrong. I'm no judgement. God knows, I sin as much as the rest, but things are...different down here. Nowhere for us to go, you see? We're here no matter what. And Society's sinners? They come here. The Wrath takes 'em.'

Sol swallowed and the click was audible.

'Here, let me get you that drink.'

The creature stood and hopped lightly to a cabinet set deep into one corner, bringing two cups and a dark green fermenting brew that smelled to Sol like the bottom of a compost heap. He drank however, still content that he was dreaming all this. The brew was, if nothing else, palatable, and he smiled.

'Thanks.'

'I know all this is hard, but we need to get you back up there before she decides she can't wait no longer.'

'She?' asked Sol.

'Sorry,' the creature blushed. 'We reckon the Wrath is female. Don't know why.'

'Wrath. Of course.' Sol said, laughing softly. He sipped more of the green brew that, against his better judgement, was beginning to taste quite pleasant. 'Go on.'

'Anyway, she collects things. We *all* collect things, don't we, but she likes to collect people. Souls, if you like.'

'Sinners,' Sol interrupted.

'Now you're getting it!' Danté smiled. 'Exactly. Sinners.'

'So where do I fit into all this?' Sol asked. 'I haven't sinned, not like she thinks.' Something else was bothering Sol, as if the current situation wasn't worrisome enough. 'I know loads of people who you'd call sinners. Adulterers, thieves. All that.'

'You mix with some nice people, Sol, I must say.'

'Well, I don't *know* them as such, but my point is, I know *of* them. Why are they not here? And speaking of which, where are all these sinners? What does she do with them?'

Danté looked to the floor. 'Here's the thing, Sol. For people to be collected, they have to be..er..' He paused.

'Don't tell me. Dead.'

'Yes. Dead. Then their souls have two paths. One is here. You can imagine the other. Anyway, what I am trying to tell you is that for you to be brought here, you will have to have died up there.' He used his tail to gesture upwards, its whistling tip close to Sol's face. 'Did you?'

'How the hell should I know?' Sol shouted. He began to stand, but something in Danté's eyes stayed his movement.

'Keep your voice down! The shimmer is only good for so long. We do *not* want her to find us down here. Are you sure you didn't die up there?'

The questioning seemed so ludicrous that Sol found himself answering without thinking. 'I don't think so. I remember buying a chest, a box for my bedside lamp. Then I remember opening it, I remember falling towards it, and then. Nothing.'

'Right.'

'Right what?'

'Just right.'

'What the Hell's that supposed to mean?'

'Shh, I'm thinking. I suppose that....' Danté stopped and ran a clawed hand across his stiff whiskers. 'There are portals here, portals to and from this place. Only we know of them, and usually, only we use them.'

'You've been up?' Sol pointed towards the ceiling.

'Once. Awful place. Anyway, I suppose you may have fallen into one. She does set them in the strangest places. They are to capture those she considers the foulest of the foul. Some that she cannot wait for.'

'So why me? And how did I manage to get here without...her finding me?'

'Well, it could be that she didn't know you were here. What happened, exactly, with your box?'

'It opened and I fell in. I heard voices, I remember that, and I had a key.' He felt in his pocket and the key was still there. He said so.

'Seems important to keep hold of that, I reckon,' said Danté. 'Anyway, you got in through a portal, and we need to get you out. He may be looking for you now.'

'I thought you said it was female?'

'The Wrath is female. Him who owns it is a man. Or was a man once. Something like that. Although as time goes on, I don't know who owns who anymore.'

'So he is the Devil or something?'

Danté laughed. 'You humans, always so quick to put a name to something. He's not the Devil or anything like it. He's gone past being anything like that. More like he's just a rumour now. Whatever the case, *she* is his pet, you could say. I don't reckon he's had a hand in her existence for as long as I've been here, at least.'

'Then why did you mention him, why did you say 'the Wrath does as *he* pleases' then?'

'Habit, I guess. No, the truth is that I don't know where or who he is. He was human once, they say. They also say that he raised a demon and that the demon took his mortal life in exchange for an immortal one. The only catch being, that existence was down here.' He gestured towards the door. 'What a deal, eh? No one knows when he created the Wrath, but they say..'

'Hang on a minute,' Sol interrupted. 'Who is 'they'?'

'You know. Just they.' Danté said.

Sol nodded, and indicated he was ready for the rest.

'Anyway, 'they' say that the Wrath was created by this immortal man as a way of placating the demon and getting his mortal life back. If he collected enough damned souls, then he reasoned that the demon would give him his life back, and exchange places again. Hasn't happened yet, as you can see. And hear.' He pricked his ears towards the ceiling. 'She's getting louder, Sol. She must know you are here somewhere. The shimmer is holding her for now. We are safe for a while longer.'

'And then?' Sol asked.

Danté shrugged. 'We run.'

Sol could hear the Wrath now as she roiled and crackled above them. He imagined the dark clouds and golden lightning and configurations that he now knew were the sounds of the Wrath growing. Soon it would not matter that he was no sinner; it would not matter that a shimmer

protected them or that Danté was here. Soon enough, the Wrath would get him and he could not be able to escape her.

'How do we beat her, then?' he asked.

'We don't. We run and we run and we find your portal.'

# Chapter 3

## Understanding Reality

The first few steps of their escape were easy and quiet, for the Wrath seemed, inexplicably, to have grown quiet during their last words together. Sol began to wonder (he had long ago stopped wondering if he was dreaming) whether he would be safely back home before long. Then a huge, deafening scream filled the void of sound, as if a million insects had made whatever squealing, chitinous, wrenching sounds they make. Sol felt a hot breath on his back as the Wrath turned her murderous attention to them once more, and they were flung off their feet, landing hard on the cracked wooden floor.

Sol was momentarily stunned, and he felt a small, clawed hand grasping at his arm.

'Come on, come on!' a voice screamed, and he turned to see Danté inches from his face, panic in his eyes, spittle spraying from his whiskered jaws. His lips trembled like those of a jilted lover.

They ran.

They had to start the journey running in the opposite direction to the one that had brought Sol to Danté's house. The Wrath now covered every line of sight back the way Sol would have ordinarily gone. He hoped that whatever skewed and deranged physics affected this place, he could find his way back in any direction, as if he were running on a tiny globe. Jags of bitter lightning forked down to meet them, crashing and sparking blue fire off the floor all around them. Danté squealed and leaped high into the air at every crash, and Sol concentrated on pounding his footsteps as hard and as fast as he could. There was no time for conversation, and each knew that to pause would be to die.

Sol blessed the green brew that Danté had given him, for far from being tired, he was filled with a strange energy that lit his eyes and turned his feet over and over without effort. He felt almost as if he couldn't stop even if he had wanted to. Despite this, and despite Danté's almost constant encouragement, he could feel the heat and the anger of the Wrath

gaining on them. He began to whimper, under his breath at first and then louder.

'...run...run...RUN...RUN...RUNRUNRUNRUNRUN!'

Footsteps pounded in his ears. He tried to fathom their distance as they ran, but the deafening strikes of lightning and bitter ozone that they left behind soon clouded his mind to anything but running.

Suddenly Danté grabbed his hand and pulled him in an almost sickening twist to the left, and his stomach turned and roiled as they passed through another shimmer. He looked around him, almost unable to believe his eyes. A cup, remnants of green fluid stickly coating the rim, sat just where he had left it.

'But..'he gasped. 'We're back. We have just run in a circle!'

The creature seemed unable to breathe. His cheeks were flushed red, and droplets of sweat dripped and splashed off his whiskers. His tail, no longer taut and whip-like, hung softly on the floor, flailing weakly. He shook his head slowly.

'No. We're not. It's another shimmer,' he explained through gasps of air, stale but infinitely fresher than the ozone-filled atmosphere on the other side of the door. 'Different location, same destination. We have come far, believe me. I have shimmers all over this place, all leading here.'

Sol sat down hard. 'Jesus, I'm going mad. It's the only explanation,' he said, wiping his forehead with his palm running his hand down the whole of his face. A sharp stinging slap to his cheek drew a loud cry from him. 'What the hell was that for?'

'You are not mad, Sol. This is reality. I will NOT have you put all this down to your madness. I will NOT fail you but I must have complete faith from you. You must believe in this or it will not work. Do you understand me?' Danté was back to his jittery, rodent-like self, tail twitching, whiskers twitching, fisherman's cap once more pulled down tight. Sol laughed. He shook his head.

'Whatever you say, cap'n.'

'What kind of answer is that?'

'The only one I can give right now, I think. It will have to do.'

'So it will, so it will,' said Danté.

'So all the shimmers lead here?' Sol asked.

'All of mine do, yes. There are thousands all over this place, but all mine lead here. You just have to know which are yours and which aren't. It gets quite simple, really it does. You always know which house is yours on your street? Which car is yours in the car park? It's

the same here for me. My shimmers are mine and I know them and love them like you love your possessions. Apart from what you see here,' he paused to sweep around the contents of his room, 'they are all I've got. Think of them as...as stepping stones to wherever you want to go. Trouble is, we could open that door twenty times and be back where we started each time. They don't work quite so well any more. With any luck we can be a way away next time we open that door. Now up you get, Sol. We need to move, 'cause you can bet your life she knows we are here and she won't stop looking.'

Noticing Sol's downbeat eyes, hitching breath and trembling hands, Danté cheered.

'Come on! What else would you be doing?'

Sol fixed him with a glance that would have been comical under any other circumstances. Under these, with the Wrath beating and swelling like a gargantuan poison-sac of souls, it wasn't. He stood and they faced the door.

'Now, when I say run, you run. Out of the door, and immediately left. Run for your life.' Danté's cheery demeanour left him and he hissed the words, tail twitching like a whip about its deadly business.

In the end he had to say nothing, for no sooner than the door handle was turned, than Sol was out of it, feet barely touching the floor. Danté followed, slamming the tiny door behind him.

It was as if the Wrath was lying in wait. They were instantly pursued, and the giant writhing mass was so close they could smell its bitter, cordite-laced aroma. Sol turned and looked directly into the mass, saw once and for all what the shifting patterns of grey and black on its surface really were.

They were faces, hideously stretched and howling madness at him, faces of the people that the Wrath had snatched from life and collected in this cloud. They came and went so fast that the impression was of one single face, deformed and turned inhuman with the horror of it, the horror of their situation. That they had some comprehension, Sol was sure. It turned his bowels to water to watch and he tore his gaze away. Danté had gained some distance from him and his heart quickened. He raced harder to catch up. All the while the Wrath screeched and clattered at him, and now the noise was made all the more desperate, for among the scratching and crackling of the lightning that still struck the floor all about him, he could hear single voices, single words and though all were different, all were the same.

Help....me...horror...fear...destroy...me

Sol reached out and clasped a hand on Danté's shoulder. He could feel wiry muscle barely covering tiny bones and a heat that was like fever. He suddenly felt exhilarated beyond anything he had ever felt, and he screeched loudly into the air. It fell silent, such was the clamour that came from the abomination behind him. He concentrated on following Danté's stamping feet and athlete's rhythm.

When it happened, it happened so quickly that he barely had time to register.

Danté turned and shouted something to Sol. Over the noise and heated fear of the Wrath, Sol heard nothing more than muted sounds, snatches of words that were swallowed instantly.

'Here...must find...shimmer...SOL!'

He heard this last word as Danté turned abruptly, his small hairy hands reaching for Sol's. Sol reached back, and would have caught them had it not been for a flash of lightning that exploded not five feet to his right. He flinched automatically, and his hands missed their mark. Sickeningly, he saw Danté turn an invisible door handle, and even as Sol slowed and tried to make the turn, the guard disappeared through the door. He saw a flash of shimmering air, like a heat haze and then nothing. For a second he paused, unbelieving. Stupidly he reached a hand into the darkness. Another lightning flash to his right, this one close enough to singe his clothing, snapped him from his daze. Pain flared in his right leg, heat and cold fear mingling through the very marrow of his bones. He ran on, blood leaking slowly from a wound he did not want to see, knowing that to keep going would lose him his escape, but that to stop would lose him his life.

He shouted and screamed and clenched his fists tight against his ears. Tears coursed down his cheeks, and a wild look appeared in his eyes. Always, the Wrath bore down on him, its immense size beyond description now. He may as well have tried to outrun the world. He could feel it pulling on him, snatching at him with its unending and relentless army of souls. It thrust images into his head, images that mirrored the flickering blood and death visions he had had so long ago in his living room. He barked a sob, clutched his stomach, so deep did his feeling of loss and pain go. He glanced round wildly now, searching for any sign of Danté, of a door, of anything. There was nothing to see but vast expanses of wooden floorboards, struck black here and there with lightning strikes. He risked one more look over his shoulder, and at the sight of the Wrath, all hate and fear and writhing faces, he screamed. There seemed there was no choice but to run and run and run and wait for the

thing, which seemed to have started it's knotting and un-knotting anew, to take him. So he ran.

Days passed, or seemed to. Sometimes the Wrath was distant, like some vast fireball bearing down on him, constant and yet far enough away so as to feel no heat from it. Other times it seemed as though the thing was on him, *in* him. He could feel the raw energy crackling his hair off his arms; feel the electricity jolt through his teeth, light his eyes with eldritch fire.

As he ran, he began to notice more and more of the blackened spots on the floor. He knew they should mean something to him, but the noise and pain of the Wrath prevented him from thinking for more than a few seconds at a time. Then he saw a splash of blood, dried to a crust. He saw a small, clawed footprint in the blood, and more leading from it. More lightning struck the floor, sending bright sparks of blue and gold spiralling into the air. He increased his speed as much as he could, (how, he could never explain) and the noise from the Wrath lessened blessedly for one vital minute. His head emptied and thoughts locked into place like the tumblers of a lock. Suddenly he knew what he had seen. Blackened spots where lightning had struck. But *ahead* of him. Blood, *his* blood he was sure, ahead of him. It all meant that he had been past this spot before. And if the blood was from the wound he had received just after Danté had left him, then..? The door Danté had left though must be just....

He was wrenched violently to the side as Danté's powerful hands grabbed him. They scrabbled and clattered against his skin, tearing it, scratching deep gouges into his arms. His panic, constant since he could remember, further heightened as he thought of running on his own again through this devil's wasteland. In blind terror, he threw himself towards his saviour, badly twisting a knee as he did so. He thrust his arms out, grasping with his own hands. Mercifully they closed on cloth, and then he saw the leathery end of Danté's whip-like tail close round his wrist. He saw the glistening heat haze and felt the now familiar sickness as he was pulled through the shimmer and landed hard on the floor of Danté's room.

He was sick, copiously and violently, and through it all he could hear the Wrath screaming in frustration. The voices joined in one long low churning moan. The protection of the shimmer could do nothing to lessen the noise now, and Danté threw a chair against it, followed that with a table and more chairs until there was a small mountain of woodwork piled there. He turned away from the mess on the floor and closed

his eyes. He let his mind sink from white to grey to black, wallowing in the relief of unconsciousness.

He awoke sometime later to the smell and spitting sizzle of frying bacon. The experience was so alien in this setting that he sat bolt upright, sure he had had a nightmare. His stomach rolled when he saw the pile of furniture by the door, heard, above the cooking sounds, the dreadfully familiar sound of the Wrath crackling in hideous parody of the frying pan that Danté was filling now with giant mushrooms.

'Thought you might want some food,' he said, conversationally, as if his life had not just been seconds from its end. 'That was close, Sol. Very close. Good thing you found your way back to this shimmer. Top marks, my friend!'

'Believe me,' Sol croaked. 'It was not planned. How long have I been out, anyway?' He rubbed his leg, which had developed a worrying throb, on one side from the searing lightning bolt, on the other with the deep ache of his sprained knee.

'Not long. An hour, maybe.'

'Did...it...ever leave?' he asked.

'No. Didn't get worse, mind. Just kind of sat there as if it was waiting. Never known it to do that before. Hmm... '

Sol tried to stand, and immediately his weakened leg betrayed him and he fell with a sharp cry.

'Now then, Sol, that leg'll not get better like that. Here, sit.'

Danté brought the single chair that did not make up the mountain at the door and Sol slumped gratefully into it. It felt good to sit.

A mounded plate of steaming mushrooms, crisp bacon and soft hot bread was dumped on his lap. He ate greedily, washing the lot down with huge mouthfuls of sweet creamy milk. A cup of the green brew ended the meal and he sat back, the pain in his leg, for the moment, gone.

'Thanks, Danté. For everything,' he said.

'Don't thank me yet. You're not home yet.'

'Speaking of which,' Sol said, 'we run again?'

'We do. But not *that* way.' He gestured to the door. Sol looked around him, eager to spot another secret exit, but found none.

'Where...' he began.

Danté moved to the centre of the room and bent to the floor. A quick flick of one tiny finger against a knot in the wood revealed a hidden catch. He pulled this and Sol heard a rolling clunk, as if a huge key had been turned. A square portion of the floor to the side of the room rose by

about three inches and revolved, revealing a dark passage that led downwards on stone steps seemingly cut into whatever passed for bed-rock in this place. Sol raised his eyebrows.

‘And how am I supposed to fit in there?’

Their escape was a tiny trapdoor, no more than eighteen inches across and about nine wide. Danté waved his hand dismissively.

‘You’ll see. And besides, this might be our only way. She’s waiting, y’see. Can you still hear her?’

Sol admitted that he could, all the while. A hissing, groaning, crackling rumble, as if the thing had settled in to wait, and would not move until it had him in her grasp. He shuddered.

‘This may be the only way, Sol.’

Danté moved quickly to a set of drawers set deep into the walls of his room. Out of the top drawer, he pulled a long rolled up piece of paper, which he hurriedly set down on an empty space of floor and unrolled. He motioned Sol impatiently to hold down the loose end, which he did, a quizzical look beginning to appear on his face. His heart quickened as he saw Danté’s plan unfurling.

‘A map?’ he asked.

‘My map. Of all my shimmers’ locations.’

‘So we can jump from here to anyone of these?’ he asked. He had left his chair, the pain in his leg momentarily forgotten, or gone, and squatted next to Danté.

‘And back again. That’s the idea. Remember, though, as I said. It’s not always that simple.’

The map looked like the mad workings of some insane mathematician. Swirls and circles with numbers and strange hieroglyphs marked inside them, that Sol took to be shimmer locations, were crossed and crossed again, back and forth, with lines of scratched pen interlacing the whole so that it resembled a mad web of unending complexity. Across it all were more markings, words, numbers, blots of ink and smudges. The guard was tapping a claw on the map, at a point where the lines of intersection seemed to meet. Indeed, as Sol rose to get a better look, he saw more clearly. There was a definite centre to the chaos.

‘Home.’

‘Just how many shimmers are there?’ Sol asked.

‘Thousands and thousands across the whole. I’ve never counted them all. I have...’ he seemed to count in his head, ‘two hundred and twelve, I think. New ones crop up from time to time. Doesn’t happen much any more, though.’

'Wow,' was all Sol could say.  
Danté looked at him approvingly.  
'Indeed.'

# Chapter 4

## Lost and Found

The light in Danté's room had dimmed. The candles that he lit were smelly, smoky things that spat grey wax onto everything within about three feet of them. Sol kept his distance. Danté was crouched over the map, pouring over it like some pirate, desperate to find a treasure.

'Now,' he said, 'the easy part is the...er...going. The hard thing will be to decide exactly *where* to go to.'

The muted screeching from outside the door had intensified in the last few minutes. Sol could feel the hair on his arms prickling in the static atmosphere that was building up. 'I think we had better make that decision sooner rather than later.'

Danté just looked at him. Without looking down at the map, he asked, 'Now, where did you come in? Anything you remember? Anything at all?'

'Nothing. Grey floorboards. Come to think about it, the floorboards here are all brown, aren't they? Does that help?'

'My boy, it helps! It helps!' the guard cried. 'You arrived at the Fifth station. All grey. Only place that is. Someone is on our side, I tell you!'

Sol looked confused.

'This place is divided into stations. Areas, with exits and entrances to them. Only one is grey. The biggest, the grey one. The Fifth. Makes sense really. You arrive at the biggest station, because most doors lead there. Why didn't I think!' He began to beat his forehead quite alarmingly. Sol started to move toward him when he continued. 'Only trouble is, there is only one shimmer that leads back there. We have to go, now. No time to lose, Sol.'

He headed to the trapdoor when Sol grabbed his arm and spun him on his heels.

'I thought we had to go out there?' he asked a little wildly, pointing at the barricaded door.

'Ah, I told you that, didn't I? Normally yes, but I have one other exit. Down there.' He pointed down the rough-hewn steps that disappeared from the trapdoor.

'But I'll never fit...' Sol started.

'It has a way of....accommodating people,' Danté explained. 'You'll see.'

They approached the trapdoor, and as Danté put his feet on the first step, Sol was sure he could hear the Wrath intensify its screams. His teeth began to ache, and he urged the guard on. The guard vanished down the steps. Sol reached one leg to the first step and as he did so, was aware of a sensation not unlike floating in water. He steadied himself on the edge of the nearby table, and then he was on the second step, then the third. He turned to look at the room one last time and was amazed to find that the edge of the trapdoor was level with his waist. How he would never know, but he was descending the steps through a trapdoor barely big enough to fit a child.

*It accommodates*

he thought. Whether that meant it grew, or he shrank he had no idea. And had no wish to know. He closed his eyes and descended.

Danté was waiting at the foot of the staircase. A fluttering torch in his small hand lit the way about five feet in front of them, no more.

'Come on,' he said. 'Not far. It's not far.'

The door appeared in front of them as Danté neared it. It hazed into view behind the thickest shimmer Sol had yet seen. It looked blurred and out of shape. The guard grasped the handle and quickly opened it. They looked out on an expanse of dirty brown floorboards.

Danté's head dropped, and Sol's heart with it. This wasn't the fifth station. It was obvious. The Wrath hummed and buzzed like a millions rain drenched pylons. Sol looked up as the guard slammed the door hard. He seemed to be murmuring something, a prayer, and curse, Sol wasn't sure. He opened the door again after the murmuring ceased.

'YES!' shouted Danté. The grey floorboards of the Fifth stretched away from them through the doorway.

Sol felt some of his jubilation, but also felt the pull of the Wrath and knew it was near. Hell, it was everywhere. Sol hoped that it had a focus, a point that was forward and a point that was backward, and if so, the *back* was what they could see now.

He shuddered with a fresh fear at the sight. It was everywhere, this thing. No longer gold and grey and blue flashes, the Wrath had turned black at its centre. Lightning arced down from it every few meters and

the floor was scorched and blackened. It was as big as a world. A smell of burning wood and (flesh?) filled the air. Sol fought to keep his lunch down.

'We have to go, Sol. Have to find your box!' shouted Danté, raising his voice loud enough to be heard.

They ran through the smoke and the heat haze that permeated the air. Ran *towards* the Wrath. Sol felt his breath catch in his throat, felt the hairs on the back of his arms fizz and crackle. He resolutely followed Danté as he weaved and ducked past lightning strikes. The going became more and more treacherous the nearer they got to the Wrath. Having run from it for so long, it seemed ludicrous to be running towards it. Now that they were near, Sol realised that they had never been near the thing. Not really. It was gargantuan, and now nothing of their environment showed past its bulk except the floor. Sol focused all his energies on the pattern of his feet, trusting to the guards unerring sense of direction.

When he first thought he saw the box, standing on the floorboards like some discarded attic furniture, he almost ignored it, so channelled were his thoughts. He had almost left the reason for their flight behind him. A sharp tug on his arm brought him around and when he saw Danté pointing and pulling him round, his heart quickened and he followed. He sped up, if it were at all possible, and drew level with Danté.

There was no doubt.

The box stood before them, perhaps a hundred metres or so away. The lid was shut, and even through the gloom, Sol could see the grain gleaming dully.

'How did you know where to find it?' he shouted at Danté. The guard shrugged and grinned a huge whiskery grin. Sol clapped him on the shoulder. As Sol turned to look over his shoulder, to look one last time at the seething mass of stretched faces that made up the Wrath's bulk, he saw the damaged floorboards a second too late. He felt his foot come down on floorboards that were splintered and cracked. He bare feet were lanced with pain as splinters drove themselves deep into the flesh there. He screamed. He was the luckier of the two. Danté stumbled on the broken floor. His feet were less than half the size of Sol's, and where the man's bridged the splintered holes, the guard's pushed through the gap, hard. Even over the hiss and writhing hatred of the Wrath, Sol heard the snap of bone as clear as if the world had been in silence. Danté yelped and tumbled from Sol's peripheral vision. He turned, unable to stop running now, and saw Danté mouthing at him.

*go go go GO GOGOGO!*

He stopped and watched in helpless horror as a fresh arc of lightning, slower than the rest and soot black inside, pierced the gloom and lit upon the guard's upturned face. There was a moment of clarity in his eyes, of peace, and then all was hell. Danté's features were stretched beyond reason, his body blackening and withering in the lightning's grasp. Smoke rose from his curled form, and as his body burned, sickeningly, the noise from the Wrath abruptly ceased. All Sol was left with was the tortured screams of his new friend. He ran someway back toward him, and caught a look of pleading in his eyes. The look stopped him cold. There was a flash of light, and a renewed burning smell and Danté was gone. The Wrath began its chitinous, scrabbling frenzy afresh, and added to the mix now was just one more voice among innumerable others. He had lost his friend, and hatred boiled in Sol. He raised his fists, uselessly of course, at the mass, cursing the very day he had stumbled into the antique shop. He turned and ran, tears blurring his eyes, vowing to succeed where Danté had not.

Twenty steps (he counted them all as a way of shutting his mind from the recent horror) brought him within six feet of the box. The dull woody gleam of its sides cut through the gloom, and he heard the choir of voices that had so enraptured him. The sound of the Wrath became even more intense as if to shut the choir out. Sol slowed his run and approached the box at a walk. He ran his hand over the closed lid, shut his eyes, and for a moment he could feel soft carpet under his feet, hear the blare and hum of distant traffic, taste the remnants of stale coffee on his tongue. He opened his eyes suddenly, sure that he would be home. But no. A haze around the box showed colours, patterns that Sol recognised as his wallpaper, but that faded almost instantly, so quickly in fact that he convinced himself that he had imagined it. He placed his hands again on the box. This time he left his eyes open, and there, around the box like a fuzzy halo, he saw his world trying to creep through the tattered edges of reality. It was there! He knew it. All he had to do was open the box and...

The key!

His fished desperately in his pockets, searching for the cold, hard chunk of metal that had brought him to this world of pain. A low moan escaped him as his hands found nothing. As if aware of his despair, the Wrath screamed louder than ever before, and did Sol hear mocking laughter in that noise? Surely not, but he turned wildly, and was quick enough, with a second to spare, to dodge a vicious lightning strike that

lit down in front of the box, its eldritch light creeping around the base of the box like a living thing, a swamp mist. The sound of its strike was deafening and Sol screamed again. His throat burned and his eyes stung from the screaming and crying he had done here. Thick tarry smoke rose from the floorboards beneath him, and he turned away.

He had to find the key, and as wrenching as it was to do, he ran a hand across the box, closed his eyes, offered a small prayer for Danté, and ran. He felt no fear, as if all his fear had drained from him now that he knew the box was his. He quickened his pace, seeing his route in his mind's eye, never wishing to see the Wrath again. He knew he could run forever in this place blinded and never falter. It was just too vast. He matched his reverse route, had he but known, almost exactly. He envisaged leaving the relative safety of Danté's room, and felt a strange pull.

*Open your eyes, he urged himself.*

*Not yet. Not yet, just a few more feet*

'NOW!' he screamed, shocking and emboldening himself in equal measure. His eyes flew open just in time to see a faint heat haze, the merest outline of a door. He reached for it, squeezed his eyes shut once more and formed a tight fist in the air. He felt cold metal in his hand and as he turned it, heard the faint snick of a door opening. His heart leapt and he copied it, literally hurling himself at the opening in space. He fell hard through the shimmer and landed with a breath-taking thud. The door slammed shut behind him.

He was back in the guard's room.

# Chapter 5

## Back Into Hell

Without the energetic, ever-moving guard here, the place appeared drab, as if in his dying, Danté had robbed the place of its own life. Sol mourned him quietly. He found a measure of the green brew and raised the battered cup high. He drank, letting the energy given drink wash through him.

'You were a good friend, old guard,' he said to no one. 'A good friend.'

He downed the remainder of his drink and set the cup down. He looked around at the room, subtly altered and yet the same as the last time they had been there. Danté's absence, he thought. He stared at the room hard. Tried to spot anything that seemed different to the last time he had been here. Anywhere that he may have left the key. Not on the chair, the table, not...

He remembered suddenly plummeting into the room, falling hard on the floor and passing out. He dropped to his knees quickly, scoured the worn, bare floor for anything...and there! Trapped between two floorboards, a dull gleaming key. *His* key. He reached for it, scrabbling his fingers in the groove between two boards until the key shifted and came loose. A fingernail tore painfully, leaving a raw wet crescent that beaded blood. He let it come, let the stab of icy pain clear his mind of the torments. The blood dripped to the floor and he pressed it into the grainy boards, ceremoniously.

'I'll get out of here, Danté, if just for you. I will.'

He retrieved the key and stood facing the door. He remembered the guard's warning that the door didn't always open on the right place, and he remembered the trapdoor that had taken them to the Fifth. Somehow he knew it wouldn't function without its owner, so it must be the door. He tried to envisage the station, the grey floorboards, and settled on an image of his box, before all this madness, standing on his living room carpet, glowing with a woody warmth.

'OK, shimmer,' he said, alarmed at the croak in his voice. 'I've had about all the shitty luck I can stand. Just take me to the box.' He had no idea if this was how Danté found his way around, but it seemed right. He only hoped it would succeed first time. Despite the drink, he had neither the energy nor the inclination to do this again. In the end, he needn't have worried. As soon as he opened the door, he knew he had it right. He stole one last look at the room, and the smudged thumbprint of blood on the floor, the still drying smear on the edge of his cup.

'Bye, Danté,' he whispered and shut the door forever.

The Fifth station was changed. The Wrath seemed to be falling apart. It had lost none of its size, but jagged motes of dirty grey ash were falling everywhere, like hellish snow, like the aftermath of a volcano. Ozone and smoke pricked his nostrils and he walked calmly towards the box in the distance. The Wrath sent down lightning strikes all around him, but it was as if the key was some kind of talisman, protecting him from danger. The Wrath seemed to sense this and doubled its attack. Sol looked at the mass, smiling, and saw the damage it was causing itself in its anger. Great chunks of it were falling away, and falling as ashen clouds. Most had disintegrated by the time they hit the floor. Faces pulled and stretched away from the thing, (souls escaping, he surmised), and gone was the raw power that seemed to exude from it. Now it was an extinguished star reaching its end. Its innards boiled and churned with black fire, its configurations increased until to look at it was painful. Sol looked down, content to walk the way to the box and contemplate his friend's passing.

He reached the box finally and it was like coming home. He reached to it and stroked its surface. The key slid home and there was an intake of breath sounding like an avalanche as the Wrath realised its undoing. An arc of fire bolted through the gloom at him and scorched the side of one leg. He screamed in pain and lifted the lid of the box.

'NO MORE!' he screamed and lunged into the darkness that lay within the box.

Sound ceased instantly and his ears whistled and hissed with its leaving. He had no senses now it seemed, sight, sound and taste all rendered useless in the utter absence of everything. He welcomed it, and sank into unconsciousness.

When light hit him again, it was the soft, welcoming glow of dusky sunlight filtering in through his living room windows. He was sitting on his chair, the key in one hand, the box on the couch opposite. The pain from his torn fingernail was the only thing that dissuaded him from the

notion that it had been a dream. The lid of the box was open and smoke wafted lazily from it, redolent with the smell of ozone and fire. He stood and looked into the blackness.

Nothing.

Not even a hint of the nightmare contents that had almost ended his life, and taken the life of his friend. He sat on the floor, rested his head on the side of the box, and cried.

The days passed slowly for Sol, blurred round the edges as if he was looking through smoke. He ate, drank, worked. And he thought of Danté. He would be on a bus and would see his whiskered grin peering at him from a stranger. Sitting in his car, he would pass him on the street, see the casual wave of a hand, see, and sometimes hear, the crack of his whip-tail. He had unplugged his phone as soon as he had woken up that first night, and yet sometime, always at night, he would hear whisperings down the line, screeches and muted howls that took him back. Back to hell.

Four days later, eyes blood-shot and tired from lack of sleep, Sol hefted the box into the back of his car. He drove for miles, through villages, across lonely desolate moors where lightning jagged down from the clouds

*the Wrath*

and thunder split the air in deafening peals. He stopped next to a crumbling dry-stone wall, and opened the back door of his car. He looked at the box for a moment, and quickly, as if to deny himself any real thinking time, he grabbed it and slung it over the wall. It landed softly in the mud, one corner sinking in it.

That night he dreamed. Danté was berating him, silently, as if a ghost, beating his tiny clawed hands on Sol's chest. He was whisked away into the air suddenly, by hands made of black fire, and a deafening laugh rent the air so that Sol's ears began to slowly bleed. The Wrath grew above him, larger and more violent than ever, faces appearing and then disappearing as quickly as Sol could focus on them. One face remained, however. That of Danté. Stretched and wrought into a nightmare of features, it screamed down at him, begging, pleading to be released. Sol tried to speak but was cut off by the intense noise. Suddenly all sound was silenced in a shock of pain and fresh blood coursed from his ears. The Wrath had finally deafened him. Sol had time to think how ironic it was that the one thing that the Wrath had used to tempt and terrify him, was the one thing that finally stopped the Wrath being terrifying.

Without noise, it was no more than an angry cloud, venting its power. Sol closed his eyes, and without sight, the Wrath was nothing.

A hand closed on his. He opened his eyes, sat up in bed, fully awake. The hand scratched slowly down his and disappeared. He flicked on the bedside lamp, which sat on a chair, and saw nothing.

*You must come back, Sol. You must come back for me...*

The voice was scratchy, hissing like air escaping a tyre, but it was unmistakably Danté's. Sol rubbed his hands across his face and looked again. Nothing.

Was Danté still alive? Surely not, after seeing his blackened hulk vaporised by the Wrath, hearing and seeing his death throes as the guard was lifted into the mass of the Wrath. Sol agonised that point over breakfast, at work, over lunch, on the drive home and all through the next night and into the morning, without a minute's sleep. He screamed his frustration at the bathroom mirror, marvelling at the demented, unshaven beast that screamed back at him.

He left the house for the last time the next morning. A cold, metal object sat in his pocket, and when he touched it, chimes sounded, a thousand chimes, a hundred thousand; all of them ringing in a wind that he could not feel. The key. He drove through villages, across desolate moors where the clouds hung low and oppressive. He stopped by a dry-stone wall, and got out of his car. He had the unerring single-mindedness of a man contemplating suicide. He looked over the wall, knowing what he would see. The box sat where he had dropped it, one corner sinking slightly into the thick mud, the dull glow of its grain vibrant even in the morning gloom. He climbed the wall, unmindful of the avalanche of stones that preceded him. As he pulled the key from his pocket, the box glowed deeper, and the chimes began again.

Voices were raised in jubilation and as Sol lowered the key to the brass lock, he whispered,

'I'm coming Danté. This is my portal; this is my way. I am the box. I am coming for you.'

The darkness lasted for a millenium. When light edged into his vision, Sol opened his eyes to a blackened, smoking, twisted ruin. The floor, where it had been grey and straight, was charred and pitted with fire. He looked upwards and saw nothing except long stretches of night. There was no end to it. Far off in the distance, he saw what had become of the Wrath. It was a thousandth of its size now, twisting and knotting itself like a coil of vipers in extremis. He smiled, and the Wrath boiled its

anger down towards him. He would fear it again, he knew, but not yet. Not yet.

He walked, and he found a shimmer. They called to him now, and he could see them like a silvery heat-haze in the air. He opened the door in the first one and was back in Danté's room again. *His* room now, he supposed. He sat, drew the map of shimmers to him, and waited. Soon enough he would hear from Danté again, and he would know how to reach him. He would save him. He studied the map. He saw all his shimmers across the void, and he began to memorise them. As a Guard O' the Wrath, he would need to know them. He smiled, and raised a glass of the green brew. Tomorrow, he would start exploring this place, and he would make himself ready for when the Wrath grew in power and size and threat.

There would be people like himself to save.

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