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Opening extract from

Time Runners
Rewind Assassin

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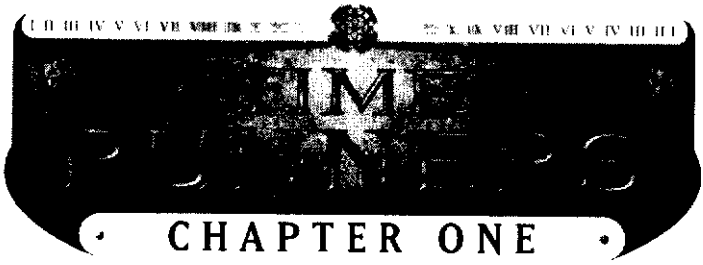
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CHAPTER ONE

16TH SEPTEMBER 1596

I stopped time to avoid getting drenched. A cart full of pigs splashed heavily through a puddle of muddy, revolting water and sent it spraying towards us. So what else could I do, apart from get soaked in stinky sludge?

That's the problem. History doesn't prepare you for the past. It's like reading a travel book about some foreign country written by someone who never went there. You wonder sometimes if they even looked at pictures. It doesn't prepare you, say, for

meeting Queen Elizabeth I, or Shakespeare, or being nearly killed, or watching the fire ships sail into the Spanish Armada . . .

There are lots of things that I wasn't prepared for, actually. I mean, I never really thought about what would happen if I disappeared from my own life – if my mum and dad and sister didn't know who I was any more. But it happened.

And I'm not the only one. We're the *lost*. The ones who fell through the cracks in time, the moments between the movements of the second hand of your watch. I'm lucky, I guess. At least someone found me. At least we're doing something about it – me and Anna.

Let's fast-forward to the past. Let's go to 1596 and watch me and Anna arriving near the Swan Theatre on Bankside, south of the River Thames. It's just outside what was then the City of London. Still a busy place, though. Full of life and people and smells

and noise and more smells. God, how it smelled. History doesn't mention the smells – or it didn't when Plonker Postlethwaite taught it. Or rather, when he gets to teach it, in over four hundred years' time. But he won't remember Jamie Grant sitting in the classroom like an idiot and thinking the past was really like that.

Because officially I don't exist.

Mistake number one – we looked completely out of place. Not, for once, out of time. Our clothes seemed pretty much right. Anna had a long brown skirt and a white blouse thing with a sort of laced suede waistcoat over the top. She looked . . . Well, she looked terrific, actually – much older than fourteen. Of course, she is much older than fourteen. But when she was lost in the 1950s she was fourteen years old and so she's stuck there. Me, I'm stuck a bit younger. And I was stuck in a tight jacket with little buttons all down the front and a pair of baggy trousers.

Could have been worse. Senex tried to make me wear what looked like an old dressing gown. Senex is our boss, I suppose. He's very old and sends me and Anna on these little trips through time. When there's something wrong, it's our job to sort it out. Which is kind of neat. But this was really only my second mission, so I was nervous and everything was new. If the old can be new.

And, like I said, we were out of place. We didn't smell and, more obviously, our clothes weren't dirty and torn and practically glued to our bodies with sweat. So we stood out. Not enough for people to gawp and stare and point and wonder if we'd invented hot running water. But enough. So they looked at us for just a bit longer, so they noticed us.

'Just remind me,' I said to Anna, 'what are we doing here? Apart from looking complete twerps, that is.' 'Twerp' is an Anna word. She likes calling me a twerp, so it was good to

include her in the whole twerp thing for once. 'Have you been here before?' I asked, before she could call me a twerp for calling her one.

'Here?' She does this thing where she tilts her head when she's taking the mickey or thinks I'm being daft. 'Here is a place. I've been to London before, obviously.'

'You mean, you will go to London,' I teased. We don't do things in the right order any more. But I knew what she meant about 'here'. 'What do I say, then?' I asked. 'Have you been *now* before?'

'If you like. And no, I haven't,' she said. 'It smells and I don't want to stay, so let's get this done quickly and leave.'

'Should be easy enough,' I said.

'Like you'd know.'

I shrugged. 'Senex said it was straightforward. And he wouldn't send a rookie like me if it wasn't.'

'A what?'

She's from 1955. Anna's very clever, but

there's lots she doesn't know. And there's lots she doesn't know she doesn't know. She probably thinks that about me too. Well, maybe not the clever bit. 'Rookie,' I repeated. 'New boy. Inexperienced recruit.'

'You're doing all right so far.' She was serious; she meant it – which I actually appreciated a lot. 'Let's go to the theatre,' she said. 'After all, the play's the thing.'

'You think there's a problem with a play?'

She sighed. 'It's a quotation from Shakespeare. "The play's the thing." It's from *Hamlet*.'

Like I said, there's lots I don't know. 'We had something called the National Curriculum,' I told her. 'It's a great advance over your time, and it means I know all about population migration and how a volcano works and what happened in ancient Egypt. I think Shakespeare maybe comes later.' I grinned. 'He was a famous engineer, wasn't he?'

It took just a moment, then she grinned back. 'You're so happy because ignorance is bliss.'

'Is that Shakespeare too?' I asked.

She ignored me and pointed to a large building that looked like the first tower of a castle that hadn't been finished. There was a flag flying from the roof. 'That's the Swan Theatre. It's where Senex told us to go. Now, let's get you an education.'

So there we were, having a laugh and not really expecting much trouble. Seemed simple enough. A Runner had gone missing. Us agents, we're called Runners. And Senex had lost contact with one. Some bloke working in the sixteenth century who actually came from that time and knew what was going on and how smelly he should be. Last thing he reported was that he'd discovered something odd at the Swan Theatre.

'He wasn't really a Runner,' Anna said

as we picked our way round the stinking puddles.

'Who – Senex's missing agent?'

Anna nodded. Then she jumped back to avoid being splashed by the cart that rattled past. The one that had pigs in it. Though I didn't really notice, as I was more concerned with the spray from the puddles that was shooting towards me.

It froze, stopped in mid-air, and everyone and everything else stopped too, except for Anna. And that's where we started.

'I suppose you think that's clever,' she said.

I stepped out of the way of the splashes and time started up again. 'I suppose I do,' I told her. 'Though I don't know really how I do it. Just sort of happens.'

'You've got a lot of power,' she said quietly. 'Control will come, with practice and experience.'

Another cart rattled past and this time I got drenched.

'Perhaps,' Anna added, trying not to laugh.

'That was deliberate,' I told her. 'At least, now, I look like I live here. So, who was this missing agent anyway?'

'Some local. A playwright, but also a spy, Senex said. Worked for the secret service, though Senex had him working for us, thinking we were part of the Privy Council or something.' She waved a hand dismissively and I caught just a glimpse of the watch-like device on her wrist. That's how we travel through time – how we slow it down and speed it up. Except when I just . . . do it.

'Doesn't matter who he was,' Anna was saying. 'It's what he discovered that may be important.'

'If anything,' I said. So far I was not enjoying the trip.

'At least we get to see the sights,' Anna said.

'Yeah,' I agreed. 'And smell the smells.'

*

There were a few people wandering round inside the theatre and there was a rehearsal going on. It wasn't like any theatre I was used to. More of an amphitheatre with a stage on one side projecting into the circular auditorium. People could stand about on the ground in the middle and watch and cheer and throw nuts or whatever. They were called the groundlings.

Then there were three galleries all the way round the inside of the circular building above the stage, with several staircases leading up to them. I guessed they used them as balconies during the plays. *Romeo and Juliet* stuff, you know?

I was surprised how far the stage jutted out into the middle. And on the stage were several actors, though they didn't seem to be in costume. I didn't know what they were rehearsing, but a plump, balding guy with a loud, deep voice seemed to be in charge.

'That's Richard Burbage,' Anna told me.

'I thought you were new here,' I said.

'Did some research.' She sounded a bit smug.

'What do you mean? We came straight here together as soon as Senex briefed us.'

'*You* might have done. *I* went to the library and looked up a few things first. We *arrived* at the same time, but that's different.'

Oh yes, we have a library. That's circular and on lots of galleried floors too. But it's bigger than the Swan Theatre. In fact it's as big as history itself.

'So, who else is up there, clever clogs?' I asked her. 'Who's that boy?'

'What boy?'

There had been a young lad standing beside Burbage. Long hair, breeches, a cheeky grin under a cap that looked too big for him. I'd only caught a glimpse of him, but he was the only person to pay any attention when we walked in, frowning across at us in surprise.

And now there was no sign of him.

'You scared him off,' I told Anna. And how right I was, as it turned out. But then I just looked round to see where he'd gone. Off at the back of the stage, maybe, where there was probably a changing area and rooms for the actors to wait, drink beer, or something.

'What is it?' Anna asked as I stared up at the top gallery opposite the stage.

'I'm not sure. Thought I saw something. Like . . .' I tried to think what it *was* like. 'It was just a quick flash of light.' Sunlight on glass. 'Like someone watching,' I realised. 'Through a telescope perhaps.'

Anna's head was tilted to one side again. 'Telescope?' She sighed. 'It's 1596.'

'Early telescope?' I suggested.

'Sounds like something a bit more modern to me,' she countered.

'Could have been,' I admitted, feeling a bit daft.

'Worth a look, then.'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'Worth a look.' But she

was already running for the nearest staircase.

It was more like a ladder than a staircase – steep and precarious. I was out of breath already, but Anna didn't seem to have any trouble haring up.

'Which level?

'Top – up again.'

'It's over ten years before a Dutchman tries to patent the telescope,' she whispered as we made our way cautiously along the gallery. Despite the bright sunshine outside, it was gloomy in the shadows under the wooden roof.

'Just along here.' I pushed past Anna to show her where the light had come from. There was no one there now, but there had been.

From down below I could hear Burbage going through a speech. Lots of sound and fury, but I wasn't listening.

'What about binoculars?' I asked.

'The same. They didn't understand the

Dutchman's telescope, so he had to invent binoculars to show people how it worked. Like spectacles.'

'Bet they didn't look like these,' I told her, moving aside so she could see what I'd found.

On the low bench-seat at the front of the gallery was a pair of binoculars. Modern binoculars, with rubberised grips and loads of buttons and dials. Probably fitted with infrared for night vision and everything. Beside the binoculars was a digital camera. And next to that was a sandwich, half eaten. In its plastic supermarket carton.

'Now, I happen to know,' I told Anna seriously, 'that they didn't have sandwiches in 1596.'

'Inventing the sandwich a few hundred years early could change the whole course of history as we know it,' Anna said in a similar tone.

'Least of our worries,' I told her. 'At least it won't be past its sell-by date. Don't suppose

these were left by Senex's Runner, because he wasn't a Runner, was he? Just some guy who lived here.'

'That's right,' Anna agreed. 'He didn't know anything about us or what we do. Or about binoculars and cameras. Or sandwiches.'

'So what *do* we do?'

'We wait and see who comes back for them. I think maybe we scared him off, but he'll have to return eventually.' She led the way to the rear of the gallery and chose an especially dim spot. I don't mean dumb dim, I mean gloomy and shadowy dim. It was a smart choice, actually. We had a good view of the stuff we'd found and the nearest two stairways, as well as of the rehearsal on the stage below.

'Might be a long wait,' I pointed out.

'Then let's speed things up a bit,' Anna suggested. She pulled back her cuff to reveal the black dial strapped to her wrist and the

world went into fast-forward. The actors below might have rehearsed for another hour, but it was over in seconds as they whizzed through their stuff like a speeded-up film. The sun was moving rapidly across the sky as clouds sped past it, and an old man swept the theatre at ninety miles an hour.

So we didn't have long to wait at all. The world slowed back to normal. The stage was empty. The sky had clouded over completely now and, although I couldn't see it clearly enough to tell, I expect the sandwich was curling up a bit at the edges. A dark figure was arriving at the top of the staircase that we had climbed.

It was a man wearing a cloak that was as black as the darkest shadows and a top hat that was even blacker. He paused, looking round warily, then made his way over to the binoculars and the camera.

Anna was clutching at my arm. Like me, she had seen the man before. Like me, she

had almost died at his hands. All around him the air seemed to shimmer and writhe. I caught just a glimpse of the malevolent, grotesque creatures that were always with him – Skitters – hiding just outside our perception.

The man straightened up and stared into the gloom – stared right at Anna and me. The most dangerous of the Dark Runners.

Darkling Midnight.