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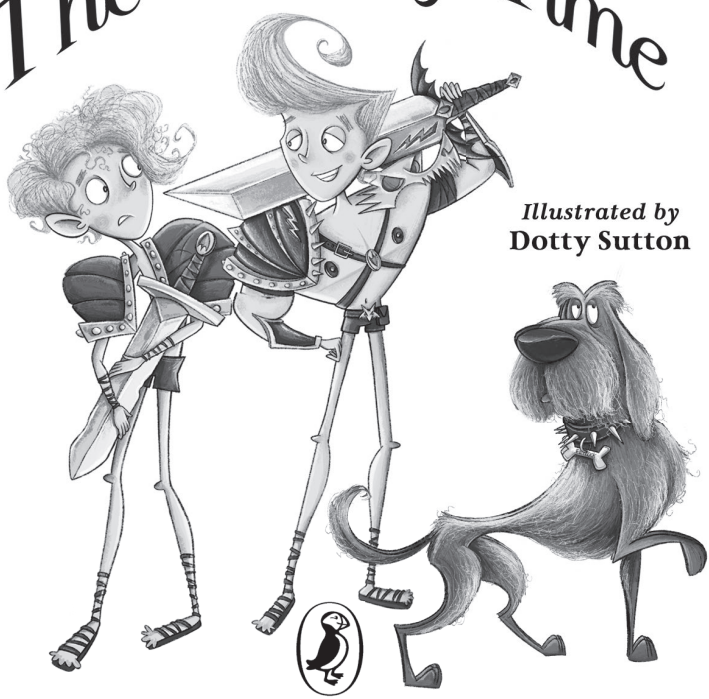
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ALEX VS AXEL

The Thief of Time





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To all at RCW, my second family



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PROLOGUE

In a room made of fire, a man who had once been dead raised his arms and whispered ancient words – words which slipped between the secret cracks in space and time and called to the unnatural creatures who crossed universes.

Creatures who ate time.

For hours he muttered forbidden words in a forgotten tongue. Then finally he heard their reply. It snaked through the room like smoke.

They were coming.

Four cracks of blinding light surrounded him. Gradually, the cracks widened, white light bursting out, and four figures stepped forth. Each had wide, lidless eyes and gaping, lipless mouths. In unison, they turned to the man.

'You have beckoned us,' they said as one.

'Yes. I called you, Time-Eaters,' the man replied. 'And now, as it is written, you must do as I bid.'



The Time-Eaters spoke again. 'So it shall be. What do you wish?'

'I have two desires,' said the man. 'Revenge and power.'

'What manner of power do you seek? The power to control others? Great magical powers?'

The man shook his head. 'I desire the power of immortality. For I have tasted death once. Never again.'

'You shall have your wish,' the Time-Eaters said. 'But first we must feed. Then we shall give.'

'I know a place. Far from here but easy for you to reach. It teems with life. So much time for you to devour.'

'What name does this place go by?' the Time-Eaters asked, their tongues flickering hungrily.

The man who had once been dead replied with a grin, cruel and cold.

'Earth.'



CHAPTER ONE

A CREEPING MIST

'Morning, Gran!' Alex Always said, through a mouthful of cereal. 'Is my uniform clean?'

Alex's gran glared at him from her comfy spot on the new sofa. 'What d'ye last slave die of?'

Alex grinned and they both said at the same time: 'Overworking!'

Gran's face softened. 'Yeah, it's clean. Warming on the radiator.'

'Thanks, Gran. You're the best.'

'I know, I know. I'll get me reward in the next life!'

Five minutes later, Alex was dressed in his brand-new uniform and school shoes, and was walking down the street with his best friend, Sienna.

'Nice fit, Always,' Sienna said.

'Ta,' Alex replied. 'It's amazing what can happen when you don't have bills piling up and bailiffs knocking on your door. I owe you.'

Sienna grinned. 'You're welcome!'

'No, but seriously, you helping Axel win that chess

competition . . . it changed my life. You taught him how to play. Winning that money. It's changed everything.'

Sienna scoffed. 'I didn't do nowt, really. Apart from put up with Axel, that is. And anyway – you've got your dad to thank for the money. That's who Axel won it off.'

Alex gave a smile. The thought that his newfound financial security had come at the expense of his greedy and uncaring father warmed his heart. He hadn't seen his father once since his return from his adventure in the magical realm of Aërth, and frankly he couldn't have cared less – his gran, Sienna and their other best friend, Irving, were family enough for him. And of course those who had helped him along the way, including his cosmic twin, Axel, who had magically swapped lives with him on his last adventure.

A few minutes later, they sauntered up to Irving's house and rang the doorbell.

Irving's dad answered.

'Ah, it's you two. Come in. Surprise, surprise, he's not ready. Doing his bloomin' hair, no doubt. Come on, Teapot!' he shouted up the stairs.

Alex and Sienna stood awkwardly in the hall, waiting.

Irving's mum walked out of the sitting room, carrying Millicent, just as their friend came flying

downstairs, his black hair flopping in front of his face. He gave his baby sister a big kiss on her downy head.

'Here he is.' Irving's dad shook his head. 'If you spent as much time exercising as you did prancing about in front of the mirror, you'd be looking a lot better than you do now, boy.'

Out of politeness, Alex swallowed a sharp retort.

'Sorry for making you wait,' Irving said. He then put the back of his hand on his forehead and closed his eyes. 'I espied a robin from my window, and his precious fragility inspired me to write an ode.'

Irving's dad covered his face with his hand. 'Enough with the nonsense, Irving. You'll embarrass yourself, soft lad. That reminds me: rugby trials this weekend!'

Irving groaned. 'I've told you, Dad. I don't want to do rugby.'

'Nonsense! Someone of your . . . *stature* would be perfect in a scrum. It'll toughen you up, Teapot.'

'Come on,' Irving mumbled, leading his friends out of the house. As they turned at the end of his street, he looked glum. 'I don't want to toughen up.'

'You don't have to, Irving,' Sienna said. 'Just be you.'

'It's being me that my dad doesn't like,' Irving replied. 'He wants me to be . . . not me.'

'Why does your dad call you Teapot?' Alex asked. Sienna flashed him a warning glance, but too late.

'It's one of his "little jokes",' Irving replied, looking at the ground. 'Ages ago, he said I was about as much use as a chocolate teapot and the nickname just sort of stuck. My whole family call me that now.'

Alex put a comradely arm around his friend's round frame. 'You aren't worthless, Irving. At all. Your dad just needs to learn to appreciate who you are. You are unique – you're certainly different from anybody I know! Now, come on. School trip today. That's something to look forward to, yeah? And then sleepover at mine?'

Irving's pale face cracked into a smile. 'Yeah. Sounds good.'



One interminably long coach trip later, the three friends were standing inside the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, where a guide with a huge beard was telling them the history of the place.

Alex stifled a yawn. 'How long is this dude –'

'Shh,' Sienna shushed. 'I'm listenin'.'

Alex and Irving pulled an amused face at each other, but stayed quiet.

The talk over, the class trooped outside. Alex accidentally bumped into Nathan, the school bully, as they squeezed through the door.

'Watch it!' Nathan said.

'I'm sorry,' Alex said politely.

'Yeah, you will be!' Nathan sneered, and grabbed Alex's collar. 'Your gran give you any cash for lunch?'

'You aren't having my money, Nathan,' Alex said plainly.

'Just shut up and give us what you got,' Nathan spat.

Without hesitation, Alex squared up to Nathan, staring straight into his eyes. 'You leave me and my friends alone, right? Things have changed; *I* have changed.'

And he *had* done, Alex thought. He was so different to the boy who had set off on an Impossible Quest. A quest where, with the help of the loyal but not over-intelligent Lorca and the brave dog Fetlock, he had defeated the evil warlock Felonious Gloam, thwarting his plan to take over the realm of Aërth and sending him spiralling to his doom from the highest point of the Nest, the formidable castle that stood at the top of a vertiginous cliff.

Now there was a steeliness in Alex's eye which

made Nathan's face pale. He held his hands up. 'All right, Always! I was only kidding.'

Nathan slunk away as the class sidled up to a long strip of brass set into the ground, leading to a large compass.

'This is the Prime Meridian,' the guide said. 'Straddle this line, and you can have one foot in the western hemisphere and one foot in the eastern. The compass represents the very heart of time on our planet. If –'

Alex gave Irving a nudge. 'There better be a decent gift shop.'

Irving nodded. 'Yes, perchance I shall purchase a new notebook in which to jot down my odes –'

Sienna glared at the two boys again. 'I'm trying to listen!'

The rest of the trip passed uneventfully. Sandwiches were eaten, a notebook was bought, and the coach back was punctuated only by singing and Willard Snipe vomiting into a bag.

At last, the class was dropped off at school and the three friends headed home to Alex's, chattering happily, blissfully unaware of the peril that was about to overtake them . . .



The end of all futures arrived in silence.

Four figures slipped through the gaps in time and space, their wide eyes always staring, their mouths always hungry.

Each landed on a different continent – one north, one south, one east, one west – and yet their arrival passed unnoticed. As one, they breathed out, and an eerie mist seeped from their mouths. An icy haze that spread, crept and crawled. That stole from all it touched.

The first it took from was a man, fishing on a black lake under a silver moon. The mist stalked him from behind and, the moment the first tendril touched him, he froze, the white cloud of his last breath hanging still in the air. The watch on his wrist stopped, as did the clock on his phone.

Below him, the fish ceased swimming, suspended like glassy statues in the dark water. On the shore, bulbous frogs froze mid-croak and the insects of the night stopped creeping and calling.

The mist reached into the sky and an owl gave a final hoot, hanging motionless in the night air, its wings unfurled, its eyes wide, staring into eternity.

Wherever the mist spread, silence followed, time stilled. It spread from countryside to town, from town to

city, from country to country, and everywhere it went it left only silence.

The Time-Eaters would travel towards each other, across a world frozen in time. Once the four were together again, all time would be taken forever. And all life on Earth would be frozen forevermore.



'Stop hogging the popcorn!' Sienna grabbed the bag from Alex.

'I am not –' Alex snatched the bag back – 'hogging the popcorn! You're the hogger!'

'Guys!' said Irving. 'Don't argue. There's plenty of food. Here – does anybody want one of my artichoke hearts? They really are very moreish.'

Alex rolled his eyes. 'Nobody wants your weird pickles, Irving.'

'Yeah. Hog *those* all you like,' Sienna said. 'Veg hog.'

The three friends were snuggled up in sleeping bags in Alex's bedroom with Mr Sunshine, his ginger cat. Irving's mobile pinged. He read the message and his brow furrowed.

'Woah! Turn the news on, Alex.'

Alex changed the channel. A newsreader, worry

etched into his face, was speaking breathlessly into a microphone.

'. . . appears we have now lost all contact with every other country in the world. We have no idea what is causing this unprecedented blackout. Does it indicate some attack from an unknown force?'

'This has to be a joke, right?' Alex said, laughing nervously. 'Some kind of prank?'

Unknown and unseen, a tendril of mist crept into Alex's flat, squeezing through a gap in the double glazing.

'The government is calling for calm, but it seems Britain is completely isolated. Now we go live to our reporter in Greenwich for a dramatic update.'

'Greenwich!' Sienna exclaimed. 'We've literally just come back from there!'

The picture switched to a nervous-looking reporter pointing to the black sky behind her.

'Yes, to be honest, Steve, I'm not even sure what I'm looking at,' the reporter said. 'But there appears to be some sort of *mist* sprea–'

Abruptly, the reporter froze, staring into the camera until, just as suddenly, the screen broke into static. The three friends jumped at the noise.

‘What’s happening?’ Sienna asked.

All Alex could do was shrug. He tried switching to a different channel, but none of them were working. He looked at his phone and swallowed. ‘Internet’s gone down as well,’ he said quietly.

Behind him, the mist seeped unseen beneath Alex’s bedroom door. Mr Sunshine awoke, his nose twitching, and let out a yowl of alarm. But too late. The mist had found them.

It touched Sienna first.

‘Alex, I –’ she managed to cry before her voice was snatched away.

Irving was next, frozen statue-still, hands reaching desperately towards his own throat.

Alex’s heart pounded in terror. ‘Guys, what’s –’

But then the mist took him. There was a moment of horror as his body became paralysed, and then . . . nothing.