

Prologue



The phone rang again.

Ted ignored it, fixing his attention on his reflection in the hall mirror. He swept his thick grey hair away from his face and ran a thin hand over the deep wrinkles on his brow. He wondered when he had started to look so old. He narrowed his eyes on the toast crumbs clinging to his uniform jumper. He brushed them off with a rough sweep before straightening his glasses on his crooked nose and taking a deep breath. He shouldn't keep the man waiting.

He reached out for the still ringing phone.

"Ted Riddlestone," he announced. "Yes sir. I know it's four o'clock. I'm leaving my house now, sir."

He hung up with a beleaguered sigh, buttoning up his thick woollen jacket and reaching for his keys. His fingers knocked against a battered metal lunchbox. There would be hell to pay if he forgot it, like the vitamins he'd almost neglected to take this morning. One missed day could be the death of him. Grabbing his lunchbox, he hurried out the front door without a backward glance.

A gust of frigid morning air swept over him. It was coming close to Christmas now. The weather was worse this year than it had been in a very long time. The chill seeped into his old bones, making him shiver.

He hated winter.

He paused on his gravel driveway, straining up to see the starry sky. That wasn't quite right. He was afraid of it.

There was a reason.

Every day in winter he travelled to work at this ungodly hour because he had a very important job to do. The mayor even called him daily with reminders to get there on time.

Ted frowned. He knew his job better than anyone. He might not like it, but he would damn well do it. He loved his town and he did his best to protect it.

Carwick was his life. It had been his family's life for generations. It was the ideal country town; quaint, picturesque, safe. No one ever had to venture into the noisy and polluted cities for anything. They even had a world-renowned university.

It was a town where old families lived and died. The residents were happy and the people never asked difficult questions. They had no reason to. Nothing was amiss in Carwick. It was perfect.

Ted heaved another sigh. It was his job to keep it that way.

The walk to work was short. Down several cobbled streets and he was in the centre of town, on the main street facing the town hall. The shops were still dark; streetlights flickered over the wooden signs above the doors. Milk cartons had been left on the step of the newsagent while the bookshop, Haven, had large delivery boxes piled up outside it.

Ted hurried past them drawing closer to the town hall. The large clock tower at its front dominated the Carwick skyline. He narrowed his eyes at the massive timepiece with a relieved whistle. He'd have plenty of time.

The imposing building was on a steep incline that forced all major roads towards it. It looked like a palace resting on an expanse of well-maintained gardens.

The age of the town hall was hard to place. People had built on top of it, adding and expanding. They never destroyed what had stood there before. That was because of what lay beneath the foundations.

Ted clutched his lunchbox tighter.

The windows on the lower levels were lit. The night-guards and a skeleton staff were already there. Their days also started early during winter.

The car park was dotted with expensive cars. Ted glared over at them. Some of the mayor's people flitted around the building, supervising him indirectly. He knew what they were doing, no matter how discreet they were.

He straightened up with a grim smile and quickened his pace up the wide steps to the main entrance. Huge granite pillars dwarfed him in their shadows.

Ted reached out to push the buzzer. Before he could, the door jerked open. The old, jowly night-guard stared at him. His cap had been tilted back on his head, showing his sweaty brow. Ted nodded, holding up his lunchbox.

The guard rubbed his meaty hand over his chin.

"Good to see you, Mr Riddlestone." He stepped back, the loose skin at his neck wobbled.

There was a wide entrance hall beyond him with giant decorated columns and a polished marble floor reflecting the glow from intricate golden lamps and the surveillance screens at the side. A dull drone from metal detectors filled the lifeless silence.

The guard tapped Ted on the arm with his baton, leading him forward. He walked over to a pretty woman scanning the monitors. He touched her hand and she turned, flicking her long auburn hair over her shoulder. The guard smiled, his stomach straining against his tight belt, a large roll of fat spilling out over it. His face looked like it had been drawn by a child; round, no chin, large ears. The only distinguishing part of him was his piercing eyes.

He was without a doubt, a very ugly man. Yet, when he caught the young woman's gaze, she lit up in appreciation. Ted paled, he hated when they did that, scrambling people's thoughts and feelings.

"Got to check your stuff, Mr Riddlestone," the guard told him. He glanced back with a meaningless smile. "Protocol."

Ted nodded. "Of course."

The guard pointed to one of the plastic trays on the conveyer belt. Ted dropped his things inside.

The lunchbox went in last, his hand hovering over the cool metal handle. Glancing back, he caught the man's clear eyes as the belt jerked forward, pulling the plastic tray into the scanner. The guard put his hand on the woman's shoulder. He started talking and her lips curled in an awed smile. Ted hurried through the metal detector. He looked back to see the woman laughing, oblivious to anything on the screen.

Ted collected his things, the old guard followed him.

"Everything's all in order, Mr Riddlestone." His eyes flashed, like a cat's lit in the headlights of a car.

Ted nodded and climbed the marble staircase. On the gallery, he paused to catch his breath. Stars swam across his vision. He wasn't as young as he used to be. The ticking of a clock echoed down the corridor. The soft sound rang loud in his sensitive ears. He was attuned to it now. It seemed slower. He was running out of time.

He rushed down the hall to his office and fumbled with the door. He rammed it open with his shoulder. It bounced off the cardboard boxes behind it.

The ticking was loudest here.

His office was like a broom cupboard; small and enclosed. There was a damp smell of mildew and the floorboards creaked, bowing under his weight as if there was nothing to support them underneath. He rounded the table with his metal lunchbox and flipped a switch under his desk. There was metallic clicking behind him and a panel in the wooden floor slid open. Steel steps flicked out one at a time, leading down into the dark.

The ticking echoed up.

A stale draft swept over Ted. He pulled a torch out of his desk drawer and aimed it into the darkness with shaking hands. He clenched his teeth.

The steps creaked under him, it was a deafening racket. Ted could feel the oppressive weight of the town hall bearing down on him. He paused at the bottom and everything suddenly felt wrong. He listened and his eyes widened. Complete silence.

The ticking had stopped.

With his heart hammering in his chest; his breathing became laboured. Bright spots flashed across his vision. If he didn't try and calm down, he'd black out. He struggled to take a few steps; his legs trembling.

His torchlight darted across the cavernous space. Towering shells of red-brick buildings loomed out of the darkness. Their empty gaping windows seemed to lengthen as he stared at them. A worn road twisted away from him. Parts of the path had been cut through huge mounds of decaying wood, charred stone and rusted metal.

These were the remains of a city belonging to a now scattered race. He had never gotten used to the sight.

In the distance, he heard stones scrape against stones. Ted swallowed a mouthful of stale air.

"Breathe," he muttered to himself.

He swung his light. It bounced off a fallen wall and highlighted the mangled wheel of a bicycle. He thought he saw a shadow flittering past, but blinked, knowing there was no one else down here.

"There couldn't be," he whispered.

He twisted and raced down the dirt street. Above him, the cavern opened up to a great height. White quartz stone embedded in the grey ceiling gleamed back at him, while sharp pointed stalactites hung over his head like teeth in the mouth of a hidden beast. It was like a starless night above his head but this city had never seen the real sky.

Ted skidded to a halt.

A wide black oak grandfather clock towered in front of him. A figure had been chiselled into it; a snarling animal with human hands straining to escape. Roughly carved and splintering in places, it was fused to the ground in a mixture of stone and wood. Numerous white rocks encircled it in a symbolic ring of salt, old magic that was supposed to trap demons inside. Ted knew better. It was only the clock that had the power to do that. During winter, as it reached the solstice, the old prison grew weak. Only Ted and his people could maintain its power as it passed through the dangerous season.

However, the ticking had stopped.

And that meant...

He aimed the torch at the door. The metal lunchbox rattled in his hand.

The door creaked open. Ted felt sweat roll down his temples.

It was empty.

It was empty.

“Impossible.”

A shadow flickered by him. He kept his eyes on the swinging door. His legs shook. He didn't want to see. If he didn't look, it wasn't there. There was heavy breathing at his back; a growl reverberated through him. Flecks of spittle splattered against his neck. His hair stood on end.

“Impossible,” he whispered.

The torchlight danced in a jerky pattern across the old wood. Another gust of warmth hit his ear, a snort followed by a terrible stench. The lunchbox in his hand dropped. It snapped open and his tools scattered.

He couldn't fix it now.

Not when *he* was free.

With a snarl, something slammed into Ted. He slapped to the ground. A bloodcurdling howl echoed throughout the cavern. Claws dug into his back, slicing through the muscles. A piercing scream ripped from his throat. Fangs nicked at his neck; the warm rush of blood blurred his vision and his head was yanked back. A wide jaw snapped down. His glasses flew off and skittered across the ground, blood splattering against the cracked lens.