Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Napoleon Xylophone

Written by Frank Lambert

Published by Matador

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Napoleon Xylophone

Frank Lambert

Copyright © 2012 Frank Lambert

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, this publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form or by any means, with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Matador
9 Priory Business Park
Kibworth Beauchamp
Leicestershire LE8 0RX, UK
Tel: (+44) 116 279 2299
Fax: (+44) 116 279 2277
Email: books@troubador.co.uk
Web: www.troubador.co.uk/matador

ISBN 978 1780882 628

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in Minion Pro by Troubador Publishing Ltd



Matador is an imprint of Troubador Publishing Ltd

For Michael,

and any other Whizz Kid looking for a different kind of hero.


Napoleon
Xylophone



You are thinking in human terms again and forgetting Time is neither tick nor tock...

Jarle Heavyfoot

Mandrake Ackx stopped listening to Time falling restless and focused his attention on the biometric lock. How human technology had advanced, how easy it remained to overcome. He placed his skeletal finger on the panel and his fingerprint began to alter until it matched precisely the one stored inside the lock's feeble memory.

As the door swung inwards, Ackx entered the narrow passageway with the changeling padding along beside him. Stepping into the elevator at the end of the hallway he looked down at the panel and pressed the button marked X, knowing it would take him where he needed to be, despite the fact he had never been in the building before. As the elevator slowly began to creak into life, Ackx closed his eyes and waited. His eyes itched. They

always itched whenever he left the underworld. It wasn't just the sun; the air in Newcastle City Centre was dry too, even when it rained. He wanted to sleep, to keep his eyes closed and feel the itching disappear. He couldn't sleep just yet though, not until he had put things in place.

The creaking continued even when the elevator stopped and Ackx opened his eyes, then pulled the doors open, seeing that he had been taken to an apartment. There was nothing of interest inside. No human life or signs of underworld innovation. The tall windows left and right allowed light to stream into the space; Ackx instinctively pulled up the lapels of his jacket to cover his neck and placed his hands inside his pockets.

'Find him,' Ackx's shrill voice ordered the four-legged beast by his side.

The changeling closed its perfectly white eyes and opened its perfectly grotesque jaws. A long, reptilian tongue flicked out of its mouth and licked the air. When it opened its eyes once more it darted towards a door at the far end of the apartment, on legs that looked too short to carry its powerful body. Stopping at the door, it began to whimper like it was about to be beaten by a cruel master.

Ackx strode bare-footed towards the door but before he reached it, the door silently opened inwards. Without breaking stride, Ackx walked through the doorway and into the workshop at the other side. He was pleased to see there were no windows; all of the light inside was

artificial. Leaning against the walking cane, crafted from his father's shinbone an age ago, he stared at his old friend and wondered why he had let so much time slip by without hunting him down sooner.

Eli didn't look up when Ackx entered. Instead, he continued to check the circuit board clamped in the crocodile clips with the test meter he held. He was a short man who appeared even shorter than his true height, hunched like he was over the circuit board. He looked tired and older than the seventy-three birthdays he had sometimes celebrated, sometimes forgot. His long, grey hair hung lank and his beard looked like it had been growing from the moment he had been born.

'Why are you here, Mandrake?' he sighed, staring through the loupe attached to his head with a delicate brass strap.

'I'm here for something we both want,' Ackx replied. 'I want you to come back and work for me.'

Eli shook his head and put the test meter on the workbench. 'You know I will never work for you again,' he said, unclamping the circuit board while carefully holding it by its edges.

'I know you will never willingly work for me again.'

Eli turned around, pulling the loupe away from his eye, but still not looking at Ackx. He walked across to a platform where a wheelchair that looked like it had been created by designers from the future stood almost complete.



'So why are you here?'

Ackx removed the horn-rimmed sunglasses he had been wearing and placed them in the chest pocket of his severely creased jacket. 'I see you are still working on the wheelchair for your grandson. How old is he now?'

'What do you want, Mandrake?'

A grin that might have been a grimace crossed Ackx's face and disappeared almost as soon as it appeared. 'I need you,' he said, unconvincingly.

'A wyte needing a human.' Eli pressed his finger on the armrest's biometric pad and a panel slid across, revealing a small keyboard underneath. 'That must be a first.' He tapped a number sequence in the keypad and ended the sequence with the letter X. The armrest slid forward with a low motorised hum and Eli placed the circuit board in the connector below, before pushing the armrest back into place.

'You would not have all of this if it was not for me,' Ackx said, sweeping his arms around, indicating the workshop and much more.

'I could sleep at night if it was not for you,' Eli said, turning towards Ackx for the first time and immediately wishing he hadn't the moment he did. Ackx's black eyes were too beautiful, too cruel.

'I still need to speak to Time,' Ackx smiled.

'You're a fool if you think I'll work on that project again.' Eli turned away from Ackx, facing the wheelchair and checking it over one final time.

'What about your grandson?'

'What about him?'

'Does he have your ingenuity?'

'No.'

'Maybe he needs a helping hand to awaken his potential.'

Eli turned back towards Ackx and this time he did not flinch. 'Leave Napoleon out of this.'

Ackx pulled back his lips, revealing needle-like teeth that had yellowed with age. He angled his head and began to pick at the gaps in his teeth with his fingernail. 'But I need someone to work for me.'

Facing the wheelchair once more, Eli typed – *Napoleon Mode* – into the keyboard before sliding the cover shut. He stepped down from the platform and faced Ackx. 'I can't leave Napoleon on his own.'

'Then bring him along.'

Eli shook his head from side to side. 'I'll leave him a message,' he said, pulling a mobile phone, that looked more like a brick, from his lab coat pocket.

'You are going to work for me without putting up a fight?'

Eli began to slowly type a message in the phone's oversized keys, then suddenly stopped. 'Where is Hestia?' he asked.

Ackx bared his teeth in response.

Deleting the message he had written, Eli started to type a new one. Before he had finished typing his message, Ackx was at his side. 'It's not that I don't trust

you. It's just that I don't trust myself.' Ackx said, taking the phone from Eli just as he pressed send. Ackx dropped the phone on the floor and it bounced twice before coming to a halt at the base of the platform.

Moving away from Ackx, Eli reached inside his pockets and pulled out a pair of shining, metallic gloves. He put the gloves on and then twisted an electrical isolator switch on the panel he now stood next to.

Ackx watched him unconcerned but the changeling followed Eli with unblinking eyes and began to snarl, guttural and malevolent. When the wheelchair bleeped twice, the changeling shapeshifted into half leopard, half hyena and sprang towards the old man in response. As the beast's front paws landed on Eli's shoulders, its hind legs curled up, ready to rip out his stomach with its now fully extended claws.

Eli fell back against the panel, knocking his head as he did. At the same time he grabbed hold of the beast with his gloved hands and needle-like spikes suddenly extended from them. As the spikes dug into the beast's flesh, a charge of electricity surged from the spikes into the changeling and it recoiled away from Eli, crashing against the panel and screeching as it writhed on the floor. Tiny electrical threads sparked over its body, like phosphorescent worms squirming in sequence, and yellow slime oozed from the changeling where the spikes had pierced its skin. A foul stench began to fill the air and Eli watched as the changeling began to morph into a hairless, gorilla-like creature with a featureless

expression. It suddenly stopped whining and gingerly picked itself up before limping over to Ackx's side with its head bowed. It licked the skin where it bled and fine metallic fur started to cover it until it shimmered, like a night time lake reflecting the light from a full moon.

Standing up unsteadily, Eli placed his hand on the side of his head and when he removed it he saw there was blood on the, now spike-less, glove.

'There you go again, Eli, reinforcing my belief in you with your clever gadgets,' Ackx laughed and it felt like a bitter wind sweeping through the workshop. He walked towards Eli all wrong, with faltering, disjointed movements, exactly the way a wyte moves when it is over excited.

Despite not wanting to appear weak, Eli shrank away from Ackx.

'Don't worry old friend,' Ackx said, as he placed a hand on Eli's shoulder. 'I am not here to hurt you. I am here to take you home.'

As Ackx ushered Eli out of the apartment, a Tarsier monkey sitting inside a goldfish bowl, left precariously balanced on top of a pile of books on the floor, watched them leave the apartment. Its huge, unblinking eyes glinted curiosity and its head turned like an owl as it followed the path they took. When they were gone, it closed its eyes and waited for the boy, like it had been instructed to do many years before.



Zam checked the message on his phone for the second time, puzzled by what he read. Then he checked who sent it again. 'I've got a text from Grandfather,' he said, 'I've never had a text from him before. Even when he sends a text, he still calls me Napoleon. How many times do I have to tell him I hate that name?'

'What does he want?' Ezzy asked.

'He told me not to come home.'

'You mean not to come home in the next half hour or so?'

'I don't know. All it says is "Napoleon, don't come home".'

'That's an odd thing to say?'

'Grandfather is always odd.'

'Yes, I like that about your grandfather,' Ezzy laughed.

A blue polecat stuck its head out of Zam's jacket pocket and sniffed the air. Unimpressed with the bland scents of the railway station, it quickly ducked back into

the pocket and went to sleep. Zam had named the polecat Rat, after mistaking it for a rat the day his grandfather first brought it home. *"I found it on a swing in the park,"* Grandfather had said by way of an explanation.

Rat hadn't always been blue; his fur only changed to that colour when his curious nature found him sniffing around a bucket of liquid Grandfather was experimenting with. The liquid was meant to be a mood dye – depending upon a person's mood, their hair would change colour to suit their frame of mind. Grandfather said he never knew what mood Zam was in and he was going to do something about it so he didn't have to keep asking him. Grandfather's experiment hadn't quite turned out the way he expected, though, and Rat's fur remained blue ever since that day, despite his mood. Not all of his fur turned blue; a band around his snout stayed white as well as the two slashes above his black eyes that were shaped like arched eyebrows and made him appear as if he was continually questioning things. His claws, too, were white.

And Zam, once he realised the colour stayed forever, dyed his hair blue because it meant no one could change it. At least, not until Grandfather saw what he had done and then made some dye as black as black could be – Zam's normal hair colour. Later, after he'd worked on Grandfather, he had more choice. Now, his long hair was black and red, because no one else at school had their hair that way and sometimes people stared at him because of his hair, not his wheelchair.

He wondered what Ezzy would look like with red hair?

Distracted when the Cranberries started to sing *Zombie* on her phone, Ezzy didn't notice the crack in the walkway and when the small front wheel of Zam's wheelchair hit the crack, it twisted and brought them to an abrupt halt.

'Sorry,' Ezzy said.

They were in Durham for the Steampunk Festival. Zam wanted to get his grandfather something special for his birthday in a few weeks' time. He found the perfect gift when they came across a furniture stall and the owner showed him a curvaceous rocking chair made from darkened walnut that had a velvet seat a peculiar shade of purple. Grandfather loved peculiar things and Zam bought the chair, asking for it to be delivered on the morning of his grandfather's birthday.

Everything had been fine until they left the festival and two youths drinking beer outside a pub stared at Zam. When they started to laugh and make comments about the way Ezzy was too good-looking to be wheeling a freak like Zam around, the afternoon turned miserable and Ezzy knew it was time for them to return to Newcastle.

'You need to look where you're going,' Zam complained.

Ezzy checked the message on her mobile with one hand as she tried to pull the wheelchair out of the crack with the other.

'I was looking, I just didn't see.'

'You need new eyes then.'

'And you need a new tongue, so you can speak nicely for a change.'

'Just hurry up and get us to the train. I want to know what Grandfather is playing at.'

Ezzy began to push the wheelchair along the uneven pathway, 'I am hurrying.'

'Maybe you should slow down then and be more careful,' Zam turned around and saw her looking at the mobile. 'Let me guess, you've broken a nail and need to make an appointment for a manicure?'

'I could leave you,' Ezzy said, frowning.

'Go on then,' Zam yelled, as he grabbed the wheels and began to push himself forward.

Ezzy stood, immobile, staring at Zam as he raced off, weaving a twisting path through the crowd of people making their way to the platform. Most of the pedestrians were too busy with their own concerns and hardly noticed the young boy in the wheelchair until he was right next to their legs, asking them to move out of his way or darting from gap to gap between one person and the next. When he reached the train he stopped. The platform was lower than the train floor. He couldn't get onto it alone.

Ezzy ran up to him out of breath. 'You nearly knocked that old man over. You need to look where you are going,' she gasped.

'Maybe I need some new eyes to go with my new tongue. Some different legs too.'

'Stop feeling sorry for yourself.'

Zam ignored Ezzy and pushed himself towards the train, pulling a wheelie when he reached it in an attempt to get into the carriage. It was too high, though, and his wheels smashed against the train, causing him to lurch over to the side, almost toppling him over his wheelchair.

'What's your problem today?' Ezzy asked.

Before Zam could answer, Rat jumped out of his pocket and raced down his right leg, onto the platform. Visibly shaking, the polecat sat up on its hind legs in front of Zam and stared at him quizzically.

Zam tightened his hands on the wheels, 'I'm sorry, Rat. I didn't mean to frighten you.'

Rat lifted his head as if acknowledging what Zam said. Then he raced up his leg, along his arm and came to a stop perched on Zam's shoulder.

Ezzy smiled. 'I'll go get the porter,' she said.

Zam watched his friend walk away from him. 'I don't know why she stays with me,' he said to Rat.

Rat curled into Zam's neck and closed his eyes.

Ezzy returned a short while later with a slight-looking porter who was carrying a ramp. The porter was breathing heavily and his red face looked strained. Ezzy offered to help, but he frowned and waved her away without a word of explanation. When he reached the train he began to unfold the ramp, positioning it between the platform and the doorway to the train's carriage. Satisfied

the ramp was secure, he motioned Zam to enter the train with a nod of his head.

Ezzy took hold of the wheelchair handles and with Zam pushing on the wheels too, they eventually managed to board the train between them.

'What's his problem?' Zam asked, as they watched the porter drag the ramp back to its storage area rather than carry it.

'I think it's a boy thing. They all seem moody today.'

Zam was about to apologise for the way he had reacted earlier, when he saw Ezzy smiling at him. He returned the smile and remained silent.

The train was jam-packed with passengers and the only space available was in the lobby between carriages. Zam positioned himself next to the door. He hated the feeling of being enclosed and always tried to get a seat near a window or doorway.

'It must be something to do with the moon,' he said.

'What do you mean?' Ezzy asked.

'Boys and their moody behaviour today.'

The train started to pull out of the station and Ezzy leaned against Zam's wheelchair, 'What has the moon got to do with boys?'

'Boys are part werewolf of course. When there's a full moon it affects us in certain ways.'

'What, you go all hairy and moody?'

'No, we grow fangs and go all moody,' he said, grabbing her arm and pretending to bite it.

Ezzy laughed, pulling her arm from his grasp. 'You're crazy, Zam.'

'I don't want to go back to school next week,' Zam suddenly blurted.

'Me neither.'

'No, I mean I really don't want to go back.'

'School isn't so bad and we only have one year left, then we'll be sixteen. Then we'll be adults.'

'You don't know what it's like, you aren't called Napoleon Xylophone. You don't know what it's like not being able to walk more than a few steps before your legs give up and turn to jelly.'

'Yeah, and I'm not a lion of the woodlands either.'

'What do you mean?'

'Your name, Napoleon, its Greek meaning is Lion of the Woodlands. I Googled it on my mobile.'

'I don't feel like a lion.'

'You don't have to feel like something to be it. You have to think like it.'

'Oh yeah. I suddenly start thinking like a lion and everyone stops bullying me.'

'Have you ever tried thinking like a lion?'

'No, but I've tried thinking like a werewolf.'

'Yeah, but that only makes you grumpy.'

'Being in a wheelchair makes me grumpy.'

'I won't talk to you if you start feeling sorry for yourself again.'

Zam paused before asking the next question: 'Have

you ever tried thinking like a girl?'

'I am a girl.'

'You don't act like one. Girls are supposed to be sympathetic.'

'I can do sympathy when it's deserved.'

'Like I said, you don't know what it's like being in a wheelchair.'

'And you don't know what it's like being blind or deaf or... I don't know, to have two heads.' She stared into his eyes, looking for a suitable response.

Zam blushed and turned away from her, staring out of the window. 'I wish you'd stop thinking like a girl,' he said, watching Durham Cathedral pass by outside.

'Anyway, ' Ezzy continued, 'you have to go to school and then university or you'll never be an astronaut. You'll never get to visit Titan.'

'I'll never be an astronaut anyway.' Since watching Professor Brian Cox, the physicist, on TV talking about methane rain and how it falls in slow motion on Titan, he wanted to visit Saturn's largest moon more than any other place in the universe.

'You don't know that.'

Zam didn't know a lot of things. One thing he knew for sure, he would never see rain falling on Titan. Closing his eyes, he tried to imagine what it would be like to be blind.

He didn't like what he didn't see.



The train stopped at Newcastle and they waited for everyone to get off before waiting for a porter to get a ramp, then finally getting off themselves. Zam let Ezzy wheel him out of the station, knowing she liked to feel like she was helping. He stared at Ezzy's reflection in the long shop windows as she wheeled him along. As usual she was also staring at her reflection. One time, he had caught her looking at herself in a small, shiny doorknob. He asked her what she was doing and she said she thought she had a fly in her eye. *'The only thing that's ever in your eyes is your face,'* Zam said.

Zam rarely looked at himself.

A short walk later they arrived at their destination. Seeing the building on Grey Street where Zam and Ezzy stopped, most people would assume the three floors above the bank were offices belonging to the bank, but they would be wrong. All three floors belonged to Zam's grandfather – Eli Xylophone, along with the rest of the building and the bank.

Zam typed the key code into the panel bolted on the wall and then placed his finger on the recognition unit. A moment later the inconspicuous door at the side of the building silently swung inwards. They entered the doorway into a narrow lobby with a black, marble floor and plain white walls which led to an ancient-looking elevator with collapsible metal doors.

'What's that smell?' Ezzy asked as they walked up to the elevator.

'I don't know,' Zam replied. 'Do you think Grandfather has been cooking again?'

'If he has, I won't be eating with you tonight. It smells like something has died and then been sprayed with skunk juice.' Ezzy pulled the elevator doors to the side and stepped into it.

Zam followed her, always thankful it was such a large elevator, and placed his fingertip on the identification panel, waiting for it to bleep and flash green before pressing the button marked X. The elevator slowly creaked its way up and when it eventually came to a shuddering halt, Ezzy opened the doors and Zam wheeled himself directly from the elevator into the apartment where he lived with his grandfather.

Although his grandfather called their home an apartment, it was more the size of a small supermarket. Most of the internal walls had been removed to leave one central space with high ceilings and large, Georgian windows to the left and right. It had been furnished with

the eye of someone who had no idea about furnishing. Expensive leather rocket chairs were placed next to the cheapest swivel office seats, while a large American-style freezer had been positioned next to a stuffed grizzly bear, and a rectangular fish tank sat precariously on top of an old dishwasher. Clockwork components were scattered around the space alongside half-assembled legs, arms, bodies and heads of robots. Grandfather's steam generator gently hissed in the background from the leak he had unsuccessfully tried to fix this past week. Apart from that and the unsynchronised tick and tock of his carefully selected Victorian clocks, there were no other sounds.

As soon as Zam entered the apartment he knew something was wrong. The door at the far end of the apartment that was always locked, gaped wide open. Zam had never seen the door open before and every time he had asked his grandfather what was behind the door, he always got the same answer: *"Don't ask questions about things that don't concern you."*

Zam had tried on numerous occasions to open the door when his grandfather wasn't in the apartment but failed every time. The door didn't appear to have any kind of lock, either mechanical or electronic. It didn't even have a handle.

He quickly wheeled himself towards the door and Ezzy followed close behind.

'What's wrong?' she asked.

'The door that doesn't concern me: it's open. It's never open.'

'That's where the smell is coming from, it's getting worse,' Ezzy said, covering her nose with her hand.

At the entrance Zam paused, almost too frightened to enter now that he finally could. Looking at the door, he saw it was as thick as his arm was long and the wall either side of the door was even thicker. No wonder he never heard any sounds coming from the other side of the door; it had to be soundproof as well as bombproof.

He peered inside.

The space was vast, larger than the apartment; so big it must have encompassed the adjoining building. There were workbenches and machinery and computers all lined up in perfect symmetry, like a factory designed for robots who liked everything to be in its correct and proper place. In the centre of the space Zam saw something that made him squint, just to make sure what he thought he saw was actually what he saw.

It was a wheelchair that didn't look like a wheelchair. It looked like the coolest vehicle Zam had ever seen in his life. Ignoring his unease, he pushed himself over to the platform where the wheelchair sat and slowly circled it.

'Wow…' he breathed.

Zam was impressed with the way his grandfather had incorporated steampunk influences into the wheelchair's build. The matt black frame was curvaceous with smooth lines and small, intricate fastenings a dull golden colour. The velvet-covered seat looked as if it had been moulded

to fit a particular sized person and Zam hoped he was that person. It had two chunky wheels at the side designed for off road manoeuvres that were also rimmed, allowing the passenger to manually propel the wheelchair. Zam wondered if the material they were made from really was gold. Knowing his grandfather, Zam guessed he would have wanted to use real gold, but his sensible head would have gotten the better of him and he would have manufactured them from a strong, light alloy that was merely painted gold. Grandfather was particular about using the right materials for the right job. The rear axle was attached to a drive mechanism and Zam guessed there must have been a concealed battery to power it. Two smaller wheels at the front made the wheelchair look like it was sat prone, ready for whatever dared come its way.

'I wish this was mine,' Zam said, thinking he could deal with whatever came his way if he owned a wheelchair like that.

Ezzy circled the wheelchair behind Zam, 'It looks like it could fly.'

'Knowing Grandfather, it probably can.'

'Why has he kept this place such a secret? And this wheelchair, imagine what you could do with it. Why keep it from you?'

'You know what he's like. He doesn't trust himself. Doesn't trust his inventions, not since the accident.'

'But...' Ezzy started, then changed her mind.

'You're right about that smell. It is worse in here,' Zam

said, reluctantly turning away from the wheelchair and moving towards a control panel behind it. Something was dripping from the panel and when Zam got closer he saw a sickly, grease-like substance covering the panel and the floor beneath it. His focus didn't stay on the ooze for long though, not when he saw the specks of blood.

'Grandfather!' he yelled.

'Zam, what is it?' Ezzy said, joining him by the panel.

Zam pointed to the blood on the floor and when he saw Grandfather's phone, he wheeled himself around the workshop, speeding from machine to machine, looking under benches and behind control panels.

His grandfather was nowhere to be seen.

'I'm sure there's an explanation,' Ezzy said.

Zam quickly wheeled around, facing Ezzy, 'Of course there's an explanation.'

'I'm only trying to help.'

'You can help by finding Grandfather.'

'Please don't argue,' a voice called out from behind. 'I hate it when people argue.'

They both turned to where the sound of the unfamiliar voice came from, staring apprehensively from side to side, but they couldn't see anyone.

'Who's there? Come out where we can see you,' Zam said.

'Only if you promise not to argue.'

Ezzy stared at Zam. 'We promise not to argue,' she said.

After a moment, a shadow began to move across the wall towards them. Zam and Ezzy looked around, but they couldn't see anyone. The shadow suddenly stopped moving, dead still, as if they had been mistaken and it was really a silhouette painted on the wall. Just as swiftly, the shadow stepped off the wall and began to walk towards them.

'He took Eli away,' it said, standing in front of them like it was a perfectly natural thing for a shadow to do.

Zam wheeled around, looking for a projector or something else that could have made the shadow shaped like a man who now stood in front of them. 'Grandfather, this isn't funny. Where are you?' he yelled.

Ezzy stepped back, away from the shadow. Then she stepped forwards and hesitantly raised her hand, touching the shadow. She pulled away from it quickly. 'It's ice cold.'

Zam turned around and faced the shadow man. 'Where is Grandfather?'

'I already told you. He took him away.'

'Who took him away?'

'Mandrake Ackx.'

Zam's mind raced. He couldn't believe he was talking to a shadow. And Grandfather, where was he? Was this shadow man the reason he had warned Zam not to come home? Maybe they should leave and get away from the shadow or projection or whatever trick of the light it happened to be. But there was blood on the floor. It could be his grandfather's blood. Zam needed answers and right

now there was only one place he could get them. 'Who is Mandrake Ackx and what does he want with my grandfather?'

The shadow began to waver, as if a wind had blown through it. 'You don't want to know.'

'Yes, I do want to know.'

'He's a wyte,' the shadow said flatly.

'What's a wyte?' Ezzy asked, wondering why one of the shadow's arms was tied in a knot.

'Can we talk about something else?' the shadow said, clapping its hands first in front of its chest then behind it's back.

'No,' Zam yelled, still not convinced this wasn't one of Grandfather's tricks. He stared at the blood on the floor. 'Tell me about this wyte. What is it and what did it want with Grandfather?'

'I can't remember. That happens to me a lot. Losing my memory I mean. Have I told you that before?'

Zam closed his eyes and began to rub his brow. *This can't be happening*, he thought. *I can't be talking to a shadow.*

'No, you haven't,' Ezzy said, wanting to ask about the arm tied in a knot, but deciding not to. 'What are you?' she eventually asked.

'I'm a shade.'

Ezzy leaned into the shade, squinting as she closely studied it. 'You're a ghost?'

'No, I'm a shade.'

'A shadow?' Zam said.

'No, a shade.'

'What's the difference?'

The shade sighed deeply, 'A shadow is just an image produced when light is blocked. It has no substance, no thought process.'

'But you look like a shadow,' Zam said, 'like someone is projecting you from an overhead projector.' He looked up above but could not see any signs of a projector.

'That's just the way it is.'

Ezzy looked up from her phone. 'A shade is a ghost,' she said, 'according to Wikipedia.'

'What's a ghost anyway?' the shade asked.

'You don't know what a ghost is?' Ezzy said, continuing to look at her phone. 'It's the spirit of someone who has died.'

'Eli told me I died.'

Zam touched the shade and pulled his hand away just as quickly as Ezzy had, when a funny sensation that felt like cold, but also like electricity, passed through his skin.

'What's your name?' Ezzy asked.

'I can't remember. Did I tell you I keep forgetting things? Especially when I'm upset.'

'I think we should call you Slink because of the way you slink in the shadows.' Ezzy said.

The shadow breathed in heavily. 'I'm not sure I like that name.'

'Okay, we'll call you Skulk then,' Zam said.

'Slink will do fine,' the shade said.

'What happened to Grandfather?' Zam asked impatiently.

'I'm trying to remember.'

'Why are you here and not wherever other spirits go?' Ezzy asked.

'I'm haunting Eli.'

'What?' Zam said.

'He killed me, so I'm haunting him.'

'That's a lie, Grandfather would never kill anyone.' Zam backed away from Slink and looked at him with new eyes.

'How did he kill you?' Ezzy asked.

'It was his invention. The one Mandrake wants him to work on again.'

Zam slumped in his seat. 'You're the reason Grandfather stopped working on his inventions? You're the accident?'

'He didn't stop working,' Ezzy said. 'Look around you at all the things he's made without you knowing.'

Zam's gaze followed Ezzy's hand gesture as she spoke, half taking in Grandfather's workshop, half taking in Ezzy.

'I've stopped haunting him now,' Slink continued. 'He's too nice to haunt. We talk a lot.'

'What do you talk about?' Ezzy asked.

'I can't remember.'

'Can't you remember anything that would help us?' Zam asked.

'Yes, yes, I can.'

'Well come on then, spill!'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot what it is I was going to say.'

Zam lifted the front wheels of the wheelchair and smashed them on the floor. 'This is stupid.'

Rat popped his head out of his pocket and hissed at Slink.

Slink backed away from Zam.

'You have a changeling,' he said.

Zam looked down at Rat. 'It's okay boy, Slink is a... a friend.'

'A changeling?' Ezzy said.

'Ackx had a changeling with him. Changelings are unpredictable. You never know what they are thinking.'

'This is crazy,' Zam said. 'First a wyte, then a ghost, now a changeling. Are we in a dream or something? Please tell me this is just a dream.'

'Changelings stink when they are hurt.'

'Is that what that smell is?' Ezzy asked.

'Yes, it looks bloody awful doesn't it?'

Ezzy frowned. 'You mean it smells awful.'

'No, I always say what I mean.'

'How can you see a smell?'

'How can you smell a smell?'

'With her nose of course,' Zam said.

'And I can see smells with my eyes of course.'

'But, you haven't got any eyes,' Zam said. 'You're just a shadow.'

Slink waver-walked towards Zam and bent into his face. Two spots of light like sunlight shining through a canopy of trees suddenly appeared. 'That's because I had them closed, of course.'

'What does a smell look like?' Ezzy quickly asked.

'It depends on what's making the smell. A lily's scent looks like a spiral of multi-coloured light, but other flowers look different. I always liked lilies.'

'What does a changeling's smell look like?' Zam asked, almost not wanting to ask.

Slink shivered, 'This particular changeling's smell is like black smoke rising from smouldering rubber tyres. There is something more though, something I don't recognise. Like the hint of an aromatic flower I've never come across before. It's odd; usually stuff smells either black or white. This is the first time I've seen anything that has a nice smell as well as a bad smell.'

Suddenly excited, Zam tried to tug on Slink's arm, but his hand went straight through the shade. 'If you can see the smell, can you see where it goes?' he asked.

'Yes. The trail leads through that door.' Slink pointed to where they had come in.

Rat hissed one more time at Slink then disappeared back into Zam's jacket pocket.

'Can you follow the trail and lead us to Ackx and Grandfather?'

'Who is Ackx?' Slink asked, with his shadowy features crumpling into what Zam guessed to be a confused frown.

'I can see this is going to be frustrating,' Zam said to Ezzy, 'but he's our only hope of finding Grandfather.'

'What if the changeling's scent disappears as soon as we leave the building?' Ezzy asked. 'We could only smell it when we entered the main hallway.'

'What other choice have we got?'

Ezzy shrugged her shoulders and pulled the funny face that always made Zam smile. 'I suppose we had better get going then.'

'Yeah, but only after I change wheelchairs,' Zam said, moving towards the platform and the high-tech wheelchair. 'I have a feeling there is more to Grandfather's wheelchair than just good looks.'