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Pastworld

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Extract

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CHAPTER 1

It was the cold hour before dawn. The streets of Pastworld City were laid out below the Buckland Corporation passenger airship like a map. At first little, if any, detail was visible through the early morning gloom and fog. There were just the regimented lines of grey slate roofs, with their yellow London brick stacks, and smoke curling up from artfully distressed terracotta chimney-pots. Flocks of mech pigeons were tucked in neat, dormant rows under the eaves of buildings. Few sounds were to be heard at that early hour, only the drone of the airship's engines and the mournful moans of the foghorns, which seemed almost to be searching for one another, somewhere along the silvered and twisted ribbon of river. Further away in the distance, from the deep, slumbering darkness at the centre of the city, could be heard the faint tolling of a single church bell.

There was little human movement.

Much nearer to the centre of the city, at the very hub of things, an eagle-eyed passenger would have spied a lone and sinister figure moving fast through the twisted streets and alleyways. He was the virus of the place, infecting the veins and arteries of the city. The shape and detail of his figure were hidden by the flapping of his long black cloak and his tall black evening hat. Every so often he turned and looked behind him, and the street lights caught in dazzle on his eyeglasses, which contained nothing but plain glass, for his vision was more than perfect. The lower part of his face was hidden behind a layer of dark silk, a scarf perhaps or a foulard, intended as a mask. He carried something bulky across his shoulders, well hidden beneath the folds of his cloak.

Ahead of him another figure, a piece of city shadow, suddenly detached itself from the shelter of one of the stone doorways and darted out on to the cobbles before him, blocking his way. The masked man quickly registered the outline of a youth: a pair of long skinny legs in shabby trousers, and a pair of worn boots; in fact the typical legs of a street urchin, a dip or a pickpocket. The boy's skin, in the almost-dawn light, was as grey as the surrounding stone, his face as sharply sculpted. He was a simple, cheerful-looking ruffian, of about seventeen. He wore a butcher-boy cap pulled down tight on his head. Its peak, which was broken down and worn by use, cast a deep shadow over the boy's face.

'Spare us a copper then, mi—' the boy started to say in a cheerily casual sort of way, but then he sputtered into silence when he saw the figure who stood in front of him.

'Nothing with me, I'm sorry,' said the cloaked man, hesitating, and with a hint of the mechanical response in his voice. There was something about the boy, something familiar. He riffled through his mind, and a flurry of boys like this one, so many boys, flickered through his head, but there was none that matched him, just an inexplicable image of an old black book. He dismissed it, shook his head and moved on swiftly.

The boy stood stock-still, frozen to the spot. He waited a moment and then he let out a sudden cloud of breath in relief. He watched the cloaked figure melt away into the fog. The boy shook himself and briefly laughed out loud. *He must be slipping*, the boy thought, *he saw me close to and didn't realise who I was*.

A Buckland Corp. passenger airship, the first of the morning, passed low overhead, its gondola lights briefly rippling across the street. The boy watched the ship pass right over him on its way to the Arrival Dock. Then he set off, his boots clattering across the cobbles. The metal heel tips scraped and rang, and he ran away as fast as he could.

While he ran the contours of the fog shifted and swirled around him. To Japhet McCreddie, known to all as 'Bible J', the fog was a living thing. The fog was his friend; he thought of it as his 'familiar'. It was a faithful beast, which prowled back and forth with him all day, followed him on his various quests around the city, shielding him, and all the other thieves (and worse) who thrived together in the shadows of Pastworld. It loomed all over the centre of the city, only too happy to swallow everything up, to make and keep secrets, and to smother the truth.

Not a hundred yards ahead of him was the exact place where the denser fog started, pumped up unbeknown to him through grilles from a system of pipes and ducts somewhere below the pavement. It hovered in a single, mechanical and severely straight line, right after the bridge. It nudged against the railings and the iron lamp posts with its beast back. In the fog there seemed to be no backwards, no place where he had come from, and no forwards, no visible place where he was going to, and that always suited Bible J's purpose. For the moment, time and place were suspended; he was just a very lucky boy hidden in the fog.

The cloaked figure hurried on. The streets widened and the bright pools of light from the gas lamps became more frequent. By his movements, by the sudden lurches and flits of his figure, he appeared both young and vigorous. The bulky thing that he carried across his shoulders did not seem to slow him down at all. He made his way up a rising street towards some temporary hoardings that surrounded a towering building.

He had just left a butchered and dismembered body, minus the head, in plain view. Its various parts were spread out wide in the shape of Vitruvian man down in the area of the city known as Shoreditch. It was a reminder to all of his followers, and to anyone else, of his ruthlessness at dealing with attempted betrayals. It was also part of another message, an elaborate signal of his

return from the dark, from the wilderness, a sharp return to business as usual that he would soon confirm to the Inspector, and to all the other fools who were after him.

The cloaked figure stopped in front of a plain wooden door set into the hoardings.



was printed in thick black lettering inches high on hundreds of identical posters pasted in rows all over the temporary walls. The entrance was lit from above by a

single lantern. He looked around, waited for a beat, then furtively prised open the door. Once inside he shut the door, and set off in the darkness across the wasteland and then into the building itself.

He ran up a wide stone staircase. The stairs, once brightly lit, were in almost complete darkness, but did not slow him down. His cloak billowed and rustled as he climbed. The whispers of sound were reflected back from the surfaces around him, from the marble-clad walls and the metal banisters. He crossed a landing and climbed higher. Here there were service stairs, wooden and bare. He did not need to stop to catch his breath. He climbed another staircase and then another, and on, higher and higher.

Finally he reached a narrow hallway. There he stopped and pulled an iron carbide official police issue lamp out from under his cloak. He shone the light around the walls and across the ceiling above him. Its beam bounced back on to his white shirt front, which was splashed over with red.

There was all the evidence around him of preparations for the coming demolition. The hallway floor was covered in fragments of fallen ceiling and lengths of aluminium ducting for the coils of now mostly dead and useless cable. This was the last of the old twentieth-century 'new builds' and now the tallest building in the city, its once proud modernity was reduced to scattered lumps of decaying plaster.

This was where he thrived best: in a lost or secret place. Either somewhere very high or somewhere deep underground. In the murk and dark, in the chaos of half

completion, of hasty closures, of sudden blocked-off passageways, dank tunnels and dangerously high roofs.

Dust motes floated in the lamp beam. He disturbed some nesting pigeons; they were real pigeons too, not Buckland mech birds. They flew up and hit the ceiling in their panic. The confusion of their wings caused fresh falls of plaster dust. A large, sleek brown rat scuttled across the floor. It stopped in front of him, as if barring the way. It lifted its head, its eyes seeming to glow red, and opened its mouth to reveal two rows of even, sharp teeth set in a fixed grimace. Then the rat said menacingly, 'No entry. Restricted area. Restricted area.'