

EOIN McNAMEE

CITY OF TIME



When the Watcher calls, the Navigator answers

Eoin McNamee

City of Time

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The world is in peril. There's not enough time. The Navigator is needed once again...A year has passed since Owen said goodbye to Cati and relinquished his role as the Navigator, leaving the Resisters asleep on their island in time. But despite the victory over the marauding Harsh, Owen's everyday life is still tainted by the enervating stupor affecting his mother. But gradually Owen becomes aware that strange occurrences are happening around the world- meteorological events which don't seem quite natural. And when he spies the vile Johnston snooping around the old Warehouse he suspects that villainy is afoot. When the Watcher summons, he knows he is needed, and reunited Cati and Dr Diamond, they set off for the City of Time in search of a means to save the world.

Содержание

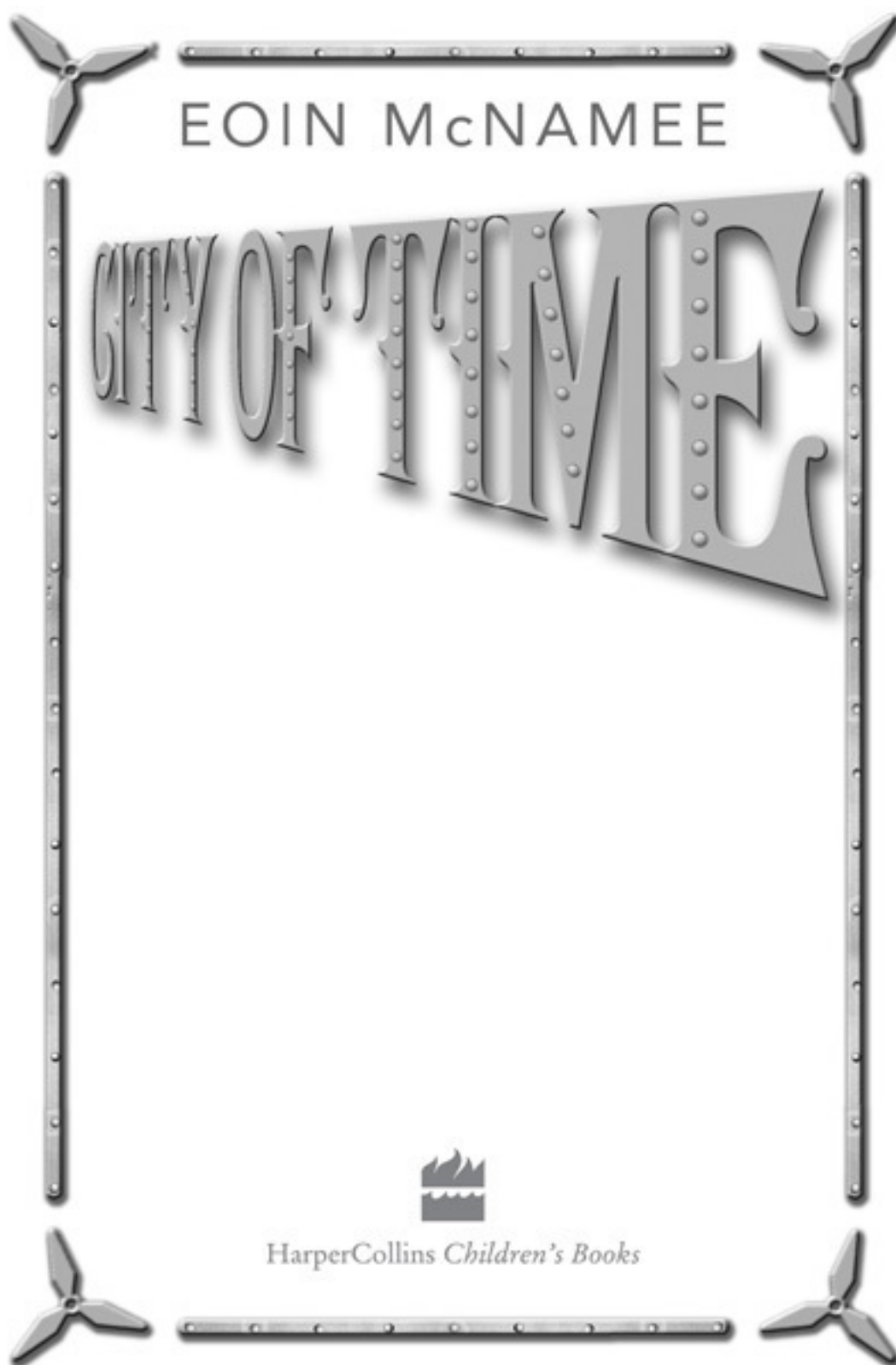
CONTENTS	7
CHAPTER ONE	8
CHAPTER TWO	11
CHAPTER THREE	13
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	17

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Eoin McNamee



CONTENTS

[Cover](#)
[Title Page](#)
[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Four](#)
[Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#)
[Chapter Seven](#)
[Chapter Eight](#)
[Chapter Nine](#)
[Chapter Ten](#)
[Chapter Eleven](#)
[Chapter Twelve](#)
[Chapter Thirteen](#)
[Chapter Fourteen](#)
[Chapter Fifteen](#)
[Chapter Sixteen](#)
[Chapter Seventeen](#)
[Chapter Eighteen](#)
[Chapter Nineteen](#)
[Chapter Twenty](#)
[Chapter Twenty-One](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Thirty](#)
[Chapter Thirty-One](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Copyright](#)
[About the Publisher](#)

CHAPTER ONE

Owen walked down to the riverbank, straddled the log that acted as a bridge over the water and shinned quickly across. It was a fine sunny day with a brisk cold wind blowing up from the sea. It stirred the branches of the trees over his head, where the first colours of autumn were just creeping on to the edges of the leaves.

He stopped at the end of the log as he always did and looked up at the dark bulk of the ruined Workhouse towering above him. It was hard to believe that it was only a year since he had stumbled across a secret organisation called the Resisters who were hidden inside, asleep until the world needed them.

Owen shivered at the memory of the deadly Harsh, the enemies of mankind and of life itself, who had sought to turn back time, spreading cold and darkness throughout the whole world. They had constructed a device called the Puissance, which was like a huge whirlwind, sucking in time. But the Resisters had emerged and Owen had joined with them to defeat the Harsh, imprisoning the Puissance in the mysterious old chest in his bedroom.

When the battle was over, the Resisters went back to sleep in the chamber known as the Starry, hidden under the Workhouse. It was where they waited until they were called again. It was his friend Cati's job to watch for danger and to wake them when it came. She was invisible to the ordinary eye, hidden, as she said, in the shadows of time.

"Hello, Watcher!" Owen shouted as he always did, knowing she could see him even though he couldn't see her. He paused and scanned the shadows under the trees, wondering if she was safe and if he would ever see her again. Time, he had learned, was a dangerous place.

He strode briskly along the path towards his Den. Owen had made the Den in a hollow formed by ancient walls and roofed it over with a sheet of perspex. The entrance was cleverly disguised with branches, so that it was almost impossible to find unless you knew where it was. He moved quickly. He was late for school, but he had an errand.

He uncovered the entrance and ducked into the Den. Everything was as it had been the evening before. The old sofa, the pile of comics, the battered old kettle and gas cooker, the lorry wing mirror on the wall. The only thing that had changed in a year was the empty space on the wall where the Mortmain had hung, the object that Owen had thought was an old boat propeller, the object that turned out to be the key to defeating the Harsh. It was a magical object, whose properties he didn't really understand. It resembled a battered piece of brass a little larger than a man's hand, with three leaves coming out from the centre. When activated, it transformed into an object of wonderful intricacy and power. The Mortmain was now in his bedroom as well, acting as a lock to keep the Puissance in the chest.

Owen looked at himself in the mirror. His face had filled out and the thin, worried boy of last year had gone. His brown eyes were still wary, but that wasn't surprising, given the danger he'd gone through.

Quickly, he opened the small box he had left on the old wooden table. He reached into his pocket and took out what looked like a small jagged stone, one that glowed bright blue. It was the piece of magno that Cati had left as a keepsake, the stone filled with a power that the Resisters harnessed like electricity. He had taken it home with him the evening before, but he wasn't comfortable leaving it in his bedroom. It belonged in the Den, close to the Workhouse. He shut the magno in the box, took a last glance round, then left.

Once outside, he climbed up the side of the bridge on to the road. His mother had forgotten to give him lunch again so he ran towards Mary White's shop. He had to stoop down to get into the tiny dark shop with the whitewashed front. As always, Mary was standing in the gloom behind the counter wearing an apron and pinafore, her hair in a bun.

“Have you been down at the Workhouse recently?” Mary asked. Owen remembered that the Resisters spoke of her and seemed to have a great deal of respect for her. How much did she know about them and their battles with the Harsh?

“Be careful down there,” she said. “Be very careful.” For a moment the shop seemed to grow even darker and Mary’s face looked stern and ancient. Then she smiled and things went back to normal.

Owen bought a roll and some ham. He put the money on the counter and Mary looked at his hands, which were unusually long and slender for a boy. *Just like his father’s*, Mary thought. *Hands that were made for something special.*

Things had been easier at school since Owen had fought alongside the Resisters. No one knew about his adventure with them, or that if they hadn’t defeated the Harsh, everyone would have vanished from the face of the earth, but he had grown up a lot during that time and his classmates sensed it. He was still a loner, but he was respected. It also had something to do with the fact that his mother was not as depressed and forgetful as she had been, so no longer sent him out in clothes he had outgrown or cut his hair with the kitchen scissors. Now he had the quiet air of a boy who could solve problems, and the younger children in particular often came to him for help.

At lunch he sat in the shelter outside. He had forgotten to buy a drink so when Freya Revell sat down beside him and offered him a sip of her smoothie, he gratefully accepted.

“Look at the moon,” she said. “It’s so clear today.”

“So it is,” Owen said.

“You can see the man in the moon,” she said.

Owen looked up and saw she was right. He turned back to Freya and felt his blood run cold. Instead of Freya’s pleasant features, he saw the face of an old woman, more than old, ancient beyond counting. He felt himself recoil.

“What is it?” she said. “Is there something wrong?”

Owen rubbed his eyes. When he opened them again, Freya’s face was back to normal. “I just... I just felt a bit dizzy,” he said, knowing that didn’t sound very convincing. “I have to go now.”

He backed away, feeling Freya’s eyes following him, her expression puzzled and a little hurt. He looked up again and for a moment the man in the moon did not seem like the kindly face from the nursery rhyme, but hard and cold instead.

Owen walked slowly home, trying to rid himself of the image of Freya’s face, how it had changed. Was there something wrong with him, or had it been a kind of waking dream?

No. It had happened and there was no one he could tell. *If only Cati were here.*

When he got back home, his mother was in the kitchen. She looked careworn, but she smiled to herself from time to time as though she remembered something funny. It was an improvement on the way she had been. She had put out tea for him. *Well*, Owen thought, *she has tried*. There was a rubbery fried egg, which looked as if his fork would bounce off it, a bowl of porridge which had set like cement, and the tea came out as hot water because she had forgotten the teabag.

Owen didn’t mind though. After his father had been lost when his car crashed into the sea, his mother had been sunk in terrible depression, barely recognising even Owen. But when he had broken the hold that the Harsh had on time, his mother had recovered a little, although Owen didn’t understand how. She was vague and sometimes hardly seemed to be there, but she was happier.

He put the egg between two slices of toast and gulped it down, then grabbed his schoolbag from the corner, kissed his mother gently on the cheek and went upstairs.

Owen spread his homework out on the bed, but he couldn’t concentrate. When it got dark he climbed up on to the chest underneath his window and stared out at black trees whipped by the wind. Then he examined the chest, as he did almost every night. It was a plain black chest with brass corners and what looked like an ordinary brass lock, and yet he dared not open it. The terrifying whirlwind which had turned time backwards and had threatened to destroy the world was trapped inside. The

tarnished brass lock, the Mortmain, could look dull and ordinary as it did now, but Owen knew it was ornate and complicated. *Not made just to be a lock on a chest*, he thought. *No matter how important the chest is.*

He pulled off his trainers and lay on the bed. He shut his eyes, but Freya's old-woman face was the first image that came into his head. Then he saw the moon, with Freya's wizened face on it. He drifted into a troubled sleep in which images of the chest and the Mortmain drifted and merged into each other.

Owen wasn't the only one thinking about the chest. At the far side of the garden there was an ash tree and in its branches a heavy figure was perched, holding a brass telescope in one hand. The man had a broad, red face, large sideburns and a sly look. His name was Johnston and he was a sworn enemy of the Resisters. He was a scrap dealer, but the previous year he had stood shoulder to shoulder with the Harsh, the cold enemy who had tried to crush Owen and his friends.

He peered through the telescope into Owen's room. Reflected in the dressing-table mirror he could see the chest and the dull gleam of the Mortmain. It had taken Johnston all year to work out that the chest contained the Puissance. The Harsh were eager to get it back. He lowered the telescope. This time Owen would not stand in his way.

CHAPTER TWO

Cati also lay awake. For a long year she had been the Watcher. There was always a Watcher – one member of the Resisters who stayed awake while the others slept.

She lived in the Workhouse on the river below Owen's house, taking food from the cavernous storerooms and cooking it in the vast empty kitchens. Every day she walked the crumbling battlements of the Workhouse, the Resister headquarters, which just looked like an old ruin to human eyes. She could see traffic moving up and down the road, but the drivers could not see her. She wondered what they would think if they knew that there was an army sleeping in the old building.

Watching other people going up and down the road was lonely enough, but worst of all was seeing Owen going to and from school or walking to his Den, his brown hair blowing in the wind from the harbour. She loved it when he waved and said hello even though he couldn't see her. She longed to call to him and walk along the river, to laugh and talk the way they had before.

Cati sighed. Her father had been the Watcher before her, but he hadn't said much about what it was like to be awake when everyone else slept. He had never mentioned the loneliness. He'd merely told her that it was a bit like being a nightwatchman. She sat up in bed. She knew that she'd never sleep that night so, pulling on her clothes and boots, she made her way towards the stone staircase that led to the top of the Workhouse. *If I'm the Watcher, she thought, then I might as well go and watch.*

It was a crisp, clear night, with a full moon that seemed to fill the sky over the harbour. Cati shivered and pulled her collar tight around her neck. She listened to the gentle murmur of the river far below. Then she heard the sound of wings. A vast skein of wild geese was flying low and hard towards the harbour. They were flying in a V formation from north to south and Cati could hear them honking. She watched them cross the face of the moon until they were framed in its circle. *They are free and I am not, she thought sadly.*

Then she froze to the spot. A second before, there had been birds on the wing. Now they were skeletons, all flesh and feathers gone! For a moment they hung in the sky, a great silent flock of the dead, their bone wings fixed in flight, their beaks agape but noiseless. Then they turned to dust which fell earthwards in a great plume until it was swallowed by the darkness below.

Cati wondered if her heart had stopped. For a long moment she stood staring at the moon, wondering if she had hallucinated the whole thing. But the geese had been there; nothing could have been more real than their wild honking high in the sky. She forced herself to think. No weapon could have reduced the geese to dust. No storm or wind or lightning strike. Only one thing could have happened. Somehow, time had changed them and they had aged many years in a single second.

Her job was to watch for a threat to the fabric of time and to wake the other Resisters if they were needed to defend. Was this one of those times? Her heart told her that it was. She turned and plunged down the stairs.

In two minutes she stood at the doors which led to the Starry, the great chamber where the Resisters slept. As she fumbled at the lock, doubt began to creep into her mind. What if she was wrong? She thought about Samual, one of the Resister leaders. The warrior was a brave fighter, but his tongue was acid and he had not approved of Cati's friendship with Owen. She could almost hear his sarcastic words. *Geese turning to dust? You woke us because you had a silly dream?*

But it wasn't a dream, she told herself. It wasn't. Cati turned the slender key in the lock and the stone doors opened.

Before her in semi-darkness were hundreds of wooden beds, and in each bed lay a Resister. What light there was came from the ceiling which was domed and covered with tiny lights like a night sky. The air was warm and still and she could hear gentle breathing sweep the room like a great sigh. She looked at the sleeping faces, recognising every one – young and old, friend and opponent.

She checked on the Starry once every three or four days. It was part of her job, although no one had ever told her so. Her visits were brief; a glance to make sure all was well and no more. To see so many familiar faces only made her loneliness worse.

She had seen her father wake the sleepers before. He had simply touched each person's forehead and after a moment the Resister would wake, looking around, a little bewildered until they realised where they were. Who would she wake first to tell about the geese? *Contessa*, she thought. Contessa, who ran the great kitchens in the Workhouse, who was gentle and wise, a mother to them all. She would know what to do.

Cati walked between the rows until she found her. Contessa was tall, elegantly dressed in a wool gown. Her hands were folded on her breast and even in sleep there was a calm authority to her face. Hesitantly, Cati reached out and touched her forehead. She stood for a moment, feeling the warm skin, waiting for her eyes to open.

Without warning, Contessa started to writhe, her back arching, pain written on her gentle face. "No," she moaned, "stop..."

Cati jerked her hand back. Contessa's body fell back to the bed and she was asleep again, breathing heavily, beads of perspiration on her forehead.

Something was wrong. Cati placed her hand on another Resister's head, a dark haired young man. He twisted and moaned as if her touch burned him. She snatched her hand away. What was wrong? She should be able to wake them.

Even as she stood there, bewildered and alarmed, Cati could feel sleep start to steal over her, as it did if you remained too long in the Starry. But this sleep felt different. It seemed... *stale*.

She turned swiftly and walked towards the door. As Watcher it was not the time to fall asleep. She closed the door behind her and locked it, then ran outside, welcoming the cool night air on her face. Outside it seemed as bright as day. The moon over the Workhouse roof shone with a light that was almost dazzling.

Cati sat down on a rock. Something was terribly wrong. There was only one option. She knew that her father had sometimes called upon special people in the ordinary world. She thought that the shopkeeper, Mary White, was one of them.

Owen was another. His father had known the Resisters and Owen had joined them to defeat the Harsh. Owen was called the Navigator, for reasons Cati didn't quite understand, and it was a title that the other Resisters seemed to respect, even, in some cases, to fear.

She would never try to contact him under normal circumstances. But these were not normal circumstances. She jumped up and began to run.

CHAPTER THREE

Owen didn't know what woke him. A gust of wind, he thought, or a dog barking? As his eyes got used to the dark he lifted his head from the pillow. Everything in his room was the same as before. His guitar propped against the wall, the model plane hanging from the ceiling, the old chest under the window. Outside the wind stirred the trees. *That was it*, he thought, *the wind*.

He allowed his head to fall back on to the pillow. It was cold and he gathered the blankets around him. He was about to close his eyes when he noticed something odd. He sat up. The air in the middle of the room looked strange. It was shimmering slightly. He rubbed his eyes, but when he looked again, there was still something different. The room looked distorted, like looking through old glass. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise as he sensed a presence in the room, and his heart started to beat faster.

Then he thought he heard a sound, a voice. There *was* somebody else in the room.

Without knowing how, he was out of bed. The shimmering air was between him and the door. He started to edge around it. He heard the sound again, like a voice, but far, far away, as if in a cave or down a well. The words were mournful and distorted. He tried to squeeze between the wall and the shimmer, but it moved towards him.

Owen stepped back, stumbling over his trainers, and instinctively put out an arm to save himself. The arm touched the moving air and to his amazement it felt warm and solid, like a living thing.

He jerked his arm away and backed towards the bed. Something was resolving itself in the middle of the room. Suddenly there was a large flicker and he realised that it *was* a person, someone he recognised, a clever girl's face with dark, curly hair, then a body wearing a faded uniform with epaulettes on the shoulders. His heart leaped.

"Cati!" he gasped. He could see her lips moving, but could not understand the words that still sounded distant. He grabbed her arm. Immediately he could hear her voice. It had been a year since she had disappeared back into the mists of time, but if he thought that she was going to exchange memories with him like two old comrades, he was sadly mistaken.

"Hold on to me, you idiot," she hissed. "It's the only way I can stay stable in your time." Owen grasped her with both hands. The flickering stopped and at last she was standing in his room, flesh and blood. Her expression was serious, but as always, there was a mocking look in her strange green eyes.

"Cati," he said again. "I missed—"

"Never mind that," she said. "There isn't time. I need you to come down to the Workhouse and meet me."

"What's happening? Is it the Harsh?"

"Come to the Workhouse and I'll explain. It's easier to stay stable there." As she spoke, Cati began to flicker again. One moment Owen had hold of solid flesh, the next there was nothing. But just before she faded completely, he saw a cheeky, lopsided grin on her face and thought he heard the words, "Missed you too ..."

Hastily, Owen pulled on jeans and a sweatshirt and fumbled for his trainers. Then he opened the door into the hallway. It was flooded with moonlight. From the room at the end he heard his mother's soft breathing. As quietly as possible, he crept along the landing and down the stairs.

Outside it was chilly and he was glad he'd grabbed his jacket. Everything was quiet and still and he could hear the sound his trainers made on the grass. He ran lightly across the two fields which separated his house from the river and from the dense shadow of the Workhouse. Its crumbling brickwork and dark, empty windows were forbidding enough to send a shiver down his spine. Owen remembered being inside and seeing cold, ghostly shapes moving through the field as the Harsh attacked. He remembered Johnston's men attacking the Workhouse defences.

When he reached the riverbank he leaped lightly on to the fallen tree. He ran across and jumped down on the other side. It was darker here and hard to see where he was going. He should have brought a torch.

“Cati?” he called out, his voice sounding a bit weak and scared in the darkness. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Cati?” In the darkness something rustled. He ran to the Workhouse door.

“Cati,” he hissed, “is that you?” There was a scrabbling sound from inside, like stones and rubble falling. In the darkness he could see the staircase, almost blocked with rocks, then a small figure dashed around the bend in the stairs carrying a strangely-shaped magno gun in one hand.

She slid to the ground in front of Owen. “I nearly shot your silly head off,” she said, starting to brush dust off her trousers.

“I wouldn’t have put it up if I’d known you were armed,” he said. “What’s going on anyway?”

“I don’t know,” she said, looking troubled. “If only the Sub-Commandant was here ...”

But Owen knew that the Sub-Commandant, Cati’s father, would never be there again. In the final battle with the Harsh, he had been sucked into the time vortex they called the Puissance and been lost, leaving Cati to inherit his role as Watcher.

Cati turned her face aside and passed her sleeve over her eyes. “You miss him too?” she said, her voice almost pleading. Owen nodded. The small, stern man had believed in Owen when everyone else seemed against him.

“Anyway,” Cati said with an effort, “let’s get inside somewhere where we can talk.”

“What about the Den?”

“All right,” she said. “Let’s go.”

They walked along the riverbank, then dived through the bushes into the Den. Inside Owen took the piece of magno from its box and placed it on the table. The blue light illuminated the room.

Cati threw herself wearily down on the old sofa. Owen went to the little box where he kept food and took out teabags and a packet of biscuits. He had added a camping stove to the Den and Cati watched with interest as he lit it. Owen made the tea and waited until she had drunk half of it before he spoke.

“So what is it, Cati?” he said. “Why did you come looking for me?”

She rubbed a hand wearily over her face and he saw the dark shadows under her eyes. “I didn’t know what else to do,” she said slowly. Then she told him about the flight of geese and how they had turned into skeletons and then dust.

“That’s like what happened to me!” Owen said. “A girl in school. Freya Revell. I was talking to her and for a moment she turned really old. I mean, her face looked ancient.”

“So I didn’t dream it!” Cati exclaimed. “It must have happened!”

“I think so,” Owen said. “It sounds as if it’s something to do with time going wrong. You should wake the others ...”

Cati shook her head. “I tried, but I can’t. There’s something wrong.”

Owen’s heart went out to his tired-looking friend. “Maybe I can ...” he began. Cati looked up at him hopefully. He knew that he possessed a strange power to awake those who were in the long sleep, although he didn’t understand it.

Cati nodded. “That is why I called you. I don’t know if it’s wrong or not. There may be consequences. But when I couldn’t wake them I didn’t know what else to do.”

“You did the right thing,” Owen said, hoping it was true.

“Do you think you can wake them?” Cati asked eagerly.

“I can try,” Owen said, frowning. He had awakened people before, but it had felt like an accident. He didn’t know if he could wake the whole Starry.

“Come on then,” Cati said, jumping to her feet, her tiredness forgotten.

Owen barely had time to put the cup back on the table before she had hauled him through the gap in the bushes and out on to the path. Within minutes they were standing before a wall of

rock. Cati put her hands against it and the outline of a massive door appeared, delicately carved with small, ancient looking figures and decorations. Cati produced a tiny key and inserted it into an almost invisible lock. Silently, the massive door swung open.

Owen stared at the sleeping people. Part of him thought of the Resisters as a dream, but now he saw them, memories came flooding back.

“Come on,” Cati said. “We’ll try to wake Dr Diamond.”

Owen nodded approvingly. If anyone would know what to do, then it would be the scientist and philosopher. They slipped between the rows of sleeping people and he recognised many of them. Here and there, one of the simple beds was empty. Defending time was a dangerous business.

Finally they came to Dr Diamond’s bed. The scientist’s chest rose and fell gently as he slept, and there was an expression on his face somewhere between a smile and a frown, as though he was on the verge of solving a particularly tricky problem that had cropped up in a dream. The pockets of his faded blue overalls bulged with mysterious objects.

“Will you try?” Cati whispered. Owen nodded.

He gently placed his hand on the man’s forehead. There was a faint tingling in Owen’s fingers, but nothing more. He straightened up. A simple touch had worked before, even when he didn’t know he had the power. He tried again, with the same result.

“Call him,” Cati said. “Call out his name in your mind.”

Owen bent forward again. This time he put both hands on the man’s forehead and closed his eyes. “Dr Diamond,” he whispered, then formed the words in his mind. *Dr Diamond, Dr Diamond.* Suddenly he felt as if he was sinking in a deep well, going down into the darkness.

“Dr Diamond,” he whispered again. Something was wrong. He felt staleness in the air around him and in the spaces his mind reached out to. The Starry felt airless and Owen found himself gasping. It was as if all the air had been sucked out of the room. He tried to detach his mind. Then, in the distance, he felt another presence. A warm presence, calling his name, groping its way towards him in the darkness.

Owen had the feeling that another mind gripped his like two strong hands and propelled him upwards, out of the darkness and into the light.

“Owen! Owen!” It was Cati’s voice. Owen came to and found himself on the floor of the Starry. He sat up and shook his head, feeling groggy and disoriented. Cati’s face swam into focus. She looked both anxious and relieved.

“What happened?” he asked. “I was calling Dr Diamond ...”

“And I heard you,” a voice said.

Owen looked up. Dr Diamond was sitting on the edge of his bed, looking down at him. There was a half-smile on his face.

“Then that was you ...?” Owen said.

“Who came and joined my mind to yours? Yes, indeed. I don’t think either of us could have awoken on our own.”

“We’d better get out of here,” Cati said, her eyes heavy. “Before the Starry sends us all to sleep.”

“Yes,” agreed the doctor, stretching. “It gets very musty in here after a year or so.”

More than musty this time, Owen thought. He watched Dr Diamond looking carefully around the Starry, as though there was something wrong that he couldn’t quite put his finger on. He was definitely worried.

Ten minutes later they were sitting on the sofa in the Den with Dr Diamond examining the camping stove. “Ingenious,” he said. “Now, Cati, tell me everything that has happened in the past year.”

Cati went quiet. How could she explain how it had felt, autumn stretching into winter. Standing under the trees as they changed, then lying awake at night listening to the wind howling through the Workhouse battlements. How could she tell him about the time it had snowed, and how in the

stillness she could hear the voices of children playing? How there was no one to talk to when she was worried or scared?

“Nothing much happened,” she said finally. “It was just ... a little bit lonely sometimes.” Owen reached out and touched her hand.

They both know what loneliness is, Dr Diamond thought. That is why their friendship will endure.

“And what happened then?” he said eventually, his eyes shrewd and penetrating. “What happened that you reached out of the shadows to contact Owen? Is time under threat?”

“I was watching on the battlements,” Cati said. “There was a flight of geese that turned to skeletons and then to dust.” She looked defiantly at Dr Diamond as though he might disbelieve her.

“I saw something the same,” Owen said. He told Dr Diamond about the girl in school who had changed in front of his eyes.

“I tried to wake the Resisters, but when I touched them it was as if my fingers were hurting them,” Cati continued. “I didn’t know what to do, so I called Owen.”

Dr Diamond looked grave. “You did the right thing,” he said. “Something or someone is interfering with time. That is why you saw what you did and why the sleepers could not be woken.”

The scientist looked at Owen and Cati over the top of his glasses. “I don’t know what is happening yet, but I do know one thing, my two young friends. There is a mystery here. And where there is mystery there is an adventure. Now, where is my pencil?”

“I think it’s behind your ear,” Cati said, exchanging a smile with Owen. Dr Diamond produced a notebook from his overalls, licked the tip of the pencil, then started to write at lightning speed. This action had a strangely soothing effect and Owen and Cati both felt their eyelids grow heavy. Within minutes they had both fallen asleep, as Dr Diamond had intended they should.

The doctor got up, lifted their feet on to the sofa and covered them with sleeping bags. Then he sat down with his notebook again.

“Night good,” he said, speaking backwards as he tended to do when distracted. He bent his head to his notebook and began to write.

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