

Chapter 1

The second cataclysm began in my eleventh life, in 1996. I was dying my usual death, slipping away in a warm morphine haze, which she interrupted like an ice cube down my spine.

She was seven, I was seventy-eight. She had straight blonde hair worn in a long pigtail down her back, I had bright white hair, or at least the remnants of the same. I wore a hospital gown designed for sterile humility; she, bright-blue school uniform and a felt cap. She perched on the side of my bed, her feet dangling off it, and peered into my eyes. She examined the heart monitor plugged into my chest, observed where I'd disconnected the alarm, felt for my pulse, and said, "I nearly missed you, Dr August."

Her German was Berlin high, but she could have addressed me in any language of the world and still passed for respectable. She scratched at the back of her left leg, where her white knee-length socks had begun to itch from the rain outside. While scratching she said, "I need to send a message back through time. If time can be said to be important here. As you're conveniently dying, I ask you to relay it to the Clubs of your origin, as it has been passed down to me."

I tried to speak, but the words tumbled together on my tongue, and I said nothing.

“The world is ending,” she said. “The message has come down from child to adult, child to adult, passed back down the generations from a thousand years forward in time. The world is ending and we cannot prevent it. So now it’s up to you.”

I found that Thai was the only language which wanted to pass my lips in any coherent form, and the only word which I seemed capable of forming was, why?

Not, I hasten to add, why was the world ending?

Why did it matter?

She smiled, and understood my meaning without needing it to be said. She leaned in close and murmured in my ear, “The world is ending, as it always must. But the end of the world is getting faster.”

That was the beginning of the end.

Chapter 2

Let us begin at the beginning.

The Club, the cataclysm, my eleventh life and the deaths which followed – none peaceful – all are meaningless, a flash of violence that bursts and withers away, retribution without cause, until you understand where it all began.

My name is Harry August.

My father is Rory Edmond Hulne, my mother Elizabeth Leadmill, though I was not to know any of this until well until my third life.

I do not know whether to say that my father raped my mother or not. The law would have some difficulty in assessing the case; the jury could perhaps be swayed by a clever individual one way or the other. I am told that she did not scream, did not fight, didn't even say no when he came to her in the kitchen on the night of my conception, and in twenty-five inglorious minutes of passion – in that anger and jealousy and rage are passions of their kind – took revenge on his faithless wife by means of the kitchen girl. In this regard my mother was not forced, but then, as a girl of some twenty years old, living and working in my father's house, dependent for

her future on his money and his family's goodwill, I would argue that she was given no chance to resist, coerced by her situation as much as by any blade held to the throat.

By the time my mother's pregnancy began to show, my father had returned to active duty in France, where he was to serve out the rest of the First World War as a largely undistinguished major in the Scots Guards. In a conflict where whole regiments could be wiped out in a single day, undistinguished was a rather enviable obtainment. It was therefore left to my paternal grandmother, Constance Hulne, to expel my mother from her home without a reference in the autumn of 1918. The man who was to become my adopted father – and yet a truer parent to me than any biological relation – took my mother to the local market on the back of his pony cart and left her there with some few shillings in her purse and a recommendation to seek the help of other distressed ladies of the county. A cousin, Alistair, who shared a mere one eighth of my mother's genetic material but whose surplus of wealth more than made up for a deficit of familial connections, gave my mother work on the floor of his Edinburgh paper mill; however, as she grew larger and increasingly unable to carry out her duties, she was quietly moved on by a junior official some three rungs away from the responsible party. In desperation, she wrote to my biological father, but the note was intercepted by my shrewd grandmother, who destroyed it before he could read my mother's plea, and so, on New Year's Eve 1918, my mother spent her last few pennies on the slow train from Edinburgh Waverley to Newcastle and, some ten miles north of Berwick-upon-Tweed, went into labour.

A trade unionist by the name of Douglas Crannich and his wife, Prudence, were the only two people present at my birth, in the ladies' washroom of the station. I am told that the stationmaster stood outside the door to prevent any innocent women coming inside, his hands clasped behind his back and his cap, crowned with snow, pulled down over his eyes in a manner I have always imagined as being rather hooded and malign. There were no doctors at the infirmary at this late hour and on this festive day, and the

medic took over three hours to arrive. He came too late. The blood was already crystallising on the floor and Prudence Crannich was holding me in her arms at his arrival. My mother was dead. I have only the report of Douglas for the circumstances of her demise, but I believe she haemorrhaged out, and is buried in a grave marked “Lisa, d. 1 January 1919 – Angels Guide Her Into Light”. Mrs Crannich, when the undertaker asked her what should be on the stone, realised that she had never known my mother’s full name.

Some debate ensued about what to do with me, this suddenly orphaned child. I believe Mrs Crannich was sorely tempted to keep me for her own, but finances and practicality informed against this decision, as did Douglas Crannich’s firm and literal interpretation of the law and rather more personal understanding of propriety. The child had a father, he exclaimed, and the father had a right to the child. This matter would have been rather moot, were it not that my mother was carrying about her person the address of my soon-to-be adopted father, Patrick August, presumably with the intention of enlisting his help in seeing my biological father, Rory Hulne. Enquiries were made as to whether this man, Patrick, could be my father, which caused quite a stir in the village as Patrick had been long married, childlessly, to my adopted mother, Harriet August, and a barren marriage in a border village, where the notion of the condom was regarded as taboo well into the 1970s, was always a topic of furious debate. The matter was so shocking that it very quickly made its way to the manor house itself, Hulne Hall, wherein resided my grandmother Constance, my two aunts Victoria and Alexandra, my cousin Clement, and Lydia, the unhappy wife of my father. I believe my grandmother immediately suspected whose child I was and the circumstances of my situation, but refused to take responsibility for me. It was Alexandra, my younger aunt, who showed a presence of mind and a compassion that the rest of her kin lacked, and seeing that suspicion would fairly quickly turn to her family once the truth of my dead mother’s identity was revealed, approached Patrick and Harriet August with this offer – that if

they were to adopt the child, and raise it as their own, the papers formally signed and witnessed by the Hulne family itself to quiet all rumours of an illegitimate affair, for no one carried authority like the inhabitants of Hulne Hall – then she would personally see to it that they received a monthly amount of money for their pains and to support the child, and that on his growing up she would ensure that his prospects were suitable – not excessive, mind, but neither the sorry situation of a bastard.

Patrick and Harriet debated a while, then accepted. I was raised as their child, as Harry August, and it wasn't until my second life that I began to understand where I was from, and what I was.

Chapter 3

It is said that there are three stages of life for those of us who live our lives in circles. These are rejection, exploration and acceptance.

As categories go, they are rather glib, and contain within them many different layers disguised behind these wider words. Rejection, for example, can be subdivided into various clichéd reactions, like so: suicide, despondency, madness, hysteria, isolation and self-destruction. I, like nearly all kalachakra, experienced most of these at some stage in my early lives, and their recollection lingers within me like a virus still twisted into my stomach wall.

For my part, the transition to acceptance was unremarkably difficult.

The first life I lived was undistinguished. Like all young men, I was called to fight in the Second World War, where I was a thoroughly undistinguished infantryman. Yet if my wartime contribution was meagre, my life after the conflict hardly added to a sense of significance. I returned to Hulne House after the war, to take over the position which had been held by Patrick, tending to the grounds around the estate. Like my adopted father, I had

been raised to love the land, the smell of it after rain and the sudden fizzing in the air when all the seeds of the gorse spilt at once into the sky, and if I felt in any way isolated from the rest of society, it was merely as the absence of a brother might be to an only child. an idea of loneliness without the relevant experience to make it real.

When Patrick died, my position was formalised, though by then, the Hulnes' wealth was almost entirely extinguished through squander and inertia. In 1964 the property was bought by the National Trust, and I with it, and I spent the latter part of my years directing rambles through the overgrown moors that surrounded the house, watching as the walls of the manor itself slowly sank deeper into the wet black mud.

I died in 1989 as the Berlin Wall fell, alone in a hospital in Newcastle, a divorcee with no children and a state pension who, even on his deathbed, believed himself to be the son of the long-departed Patrick and Harriet August, and who died eventually from the disease that has been the bane of my lives – multiple myelomas which spread throughout the body until the body itself simply ceases to function.

Naturally my reaction to being born again precisely where I had begun – in the women's restroom of Berwick-upon-Tweed station, on New Year's Day 1919, with all the memories of my life that had gone before, induced its own rather clichéd madness in me. As the full powers of my adult consciousness returned to my child's body, I fell first into a confusion, then an agony, then a doubt, then a despair, than a screaming, then a shrieking, and finally, aged seven years old, I was committed to St Margot's Asylum for Unfortunates, where I frankly believed myself to belong, and within six months of my confinement succeeded in throwing myself out of a window on the third floor.

Retrospectively, I realise that three floors are frequently not high enough to guarantee the quick, relatively painless death that such circumstances warrant, and I might easily have snapped every bone in my lower body and yet retained my consciousness intact. Thankfully, I landed on my head, and that was that.