

# Timesmith

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# 1

## THE SCREAM

The man buried in the cold earth screamed a motionless scream.

He had long since given up trying to move; his body was rotten and useless. Every message his angry brain threw out went ignored by his wasted, pathetic frame. Yet he *felt* everything.

Worms moved through him, wriggling, feeding, persistently tearing at his human remains. Moisture formed about his darkened flesh, seeping in with needles of ice-cold indifference that cracked his calcified bones. And the sword; even after all this time he felt the mocking metal of the sword impaling his inert heart. In the age since his demise the pain had not diminished. Unimaginable, never-ending pain.

Nothing worked any more. Only his soul, his very essence, prevailed somewhere deep within. He felt the passing of time like the slow, maddening drip, drip, drip of a frozen waterfall. Seconds laughed at him for decades. Decades scorned him for an eternity. He was buried in time.

And yet Rouland endured it all.

One burning thought kept him going. It was a thought about a boy, a boy who had beaten him. Rouland was immortal, unstoppable. He had never been beaten before. The boy's face came into his mind and a new wave of hatred consumed him.

*Jack Morrow.*

He had bested Rouland. He had plunged a sword through the centre of his heart and suspended his eternal existence. He had buried him in this patch of earth and left him to rot, to die like a mortal man.

But Rouland was not mortal, and his rage sustained him through the lonely, dark years. He waited, and plotted and schemed. He knew his day would come. His followers would find him and restore him and he would have his revenge on Jack Morrow.

Rouland pictured his victory, and he forgot about the pain. He was satisfied. Then as the notion subsided the hurt returned, stronger than ever. Inside the prison of his mind, hate condensed into pools of agony and Rouland's soul screamed . . .

Captain Alda de Vienne screamed.

Every fibre in her body was being torn apart.

She opened her eyes, blinking away the frozen tears. She turned her head, and her neck cracked loudly. It was

broken, like every bone in her body. A flash of pain thundered up her spine. Yes, she still felt pain, in spite of the long years since her death.

She needed to heal. One disjointed arm flayed about, searching for her sword. Her bent fingers touched the cool metal and she gripped it with all her pathetic might. Immediately the healing energy trickled from the blade into her shattered frame, righting her ancient bones.

She lay there for an age, feeding off the sword, her body realigning itself into its proper order. Eventually she sat up and studied her surroundings: the bodies of her sisters lay about her, twisted and inert. They were in the catacombs, deep below London, safe in the dim coolness of their resting chamber.

Her mind was a fog of recent memories. She forced herself to recall what she could: they had journeyed upstream, forwards in time from 1940 to 2008, to do battle with a boy. Why? She could not recall. Her master had wished it, and that was enough.

Her master.

Rouland.

His beautiful image erupted in her mind's eye and she suddenly remembered. Her beloved Rouland had been defeated, his mind was missing from hers, and the loss burned like fire.

Alda de Vienne screamed anew.

\* \* \*

The Sorrowline.

A corridor through time.

A corridor that linked a gravestone to the date of that person's death.

Jack Morrow endured its uneasy currents. The nausea, the wall of remorse, the flood of regret – it was all here, caressing him, willing him onwards. He gave himself over to its hideous beauty, completely and without resistance, feeling himself fall back through the years to the font of sorrow.

It was still new to him, he recalled with a shudder. He had only recently discovered his natural ability to open up a Sorrowline and enter its depths. Already he had been back in time to 1940 – to the heart of London during the nightly Blitz of the Second World War. He had made friends there – friends he now wished to return to.

So he was going back to the past, to London, 1940. He planned to find Davey Vale, his teenage grandfather-to-be. They had already shared a great adventure, and somewhere along the way their friendship had grown, in spite of many trials. And he hoped Eloise would be there too. She had been one of Rouland's personal army – the Paladin – an undead knight who had defied her master. Jack had grown to trust and care for her. She had proved her undying loyalty to him during their recent adventures. He wallowed in his own memories and for a moment they blocked out the sorrow around him.

And then the Sorrowline shattered.  
Jack screamed.

Blackness. Emptiness. Nothing.

Davey Vale could not scream. There was no air left in his lungs. His fingers gripped Eloise's hand, his only compass in a world of void. They were in the folds of a Grimmire.

They had left the battlefield of 2008 behind them. They had won. Rouland was defeated – Jack had seen to that. The immortal's body had been dragged back in time to 1805 and buried. The Paladin, Rouland's undead knights, had disappeared. And the Grimmire, a mysterious hooded creature, a keeper of Destiny, had taken Davey and Eloise under its mighty cape. Together they fell back through the years, back to 1940 where they belonged.

The dark cape suddenly parted, and Davey and Eloise dropped onto a cobbled street. They were back in war-torn London. Davey smiled, glad to be home. He looked up at the elongated shape of the hooded Grimmire. It was already evaporating into the cracks between worlds. Its body became transparent and vanished. In its place was the sickly sky, darkened by towers of ashen smoke that framed a squadron of German aeroplanes as they retreated to the south. The wail of an air-raid siren rose and fell on the hot wind that pulled at Davey's dark ragged hair.

‘Davey!’ Eloise cried, her tone full of anguish. He turned to see what she was looking at, and his smile died.

A wall of fire and smoke and soot blew towards them at a ferocious speed. The shattered structure of a once noble building had succumbed to the flames and fell onto the street below. The burning ash thundered towards them like a herd of living fire creatures, propelled by a chaotic wind from Hell.

Davey screamed.

## 2

### COUNCIL OF PEERS

‘What happened to us, sister?’ Geneviève asked, her deep-set eyes fixed on her captain.

All of the Paladin had recovered enough to stand, and had formed a rough circle around Captain de Vienne. Geneviève was the youngest of the eleven Paladin. She had been no more than sixteen at the time of her death. Not that it really mattered: her life *after* death was measured in centuries. Her old life was a whisper of a memory. Like her sisters, Rouland had resurrected her to be one of his Paladin, his personal knights. Her dark armour was dusty and worn, its metal edges scuffed, the leather straps marked. Captain de Vienne checked the other Paladin: they were in a similar state, some much worse. Even their blood-red cloaks were tattered, torn and burned.

Captain de Vienne had led the Paladin these last one hundred years. Never before could she recall them looking like this.

‘We were defeated,’ she concluded in a whisper, hardly able to believe her own words. She let them drift in the air

until they had taken hold in her sisters' minds. Defeat was unthinkable. They were Paladin.

'How?' asked Geneviève. 'My memory is fractured.'

Captain de Vienne searched her own thoughts and found them in disarray. 'I know not,' she replied. 'My recall is . . . elusive.'

'We were with Master Rouland, at St Paul's Cathedral,' Geneviève said hesitantly. 'But it was not now. It was hence. Upstream.'

'Yes,' Captain de Vienne recalled. 'We had travelled upstream, to the future. To 2008.'

'Are we not in 1940 now?' asked another. Her name was Olivia.

'Yes, we are back in our present, our correct time,' Captain de Vienne confirmed. 'This is 1940.' She could not explain how she knew – it was a sense deep within her – but none of her Paladin sisters doubted her.

Geneviève stepped closer to Captain de Vienne and said, 'But what were we doing in 2008? We do not travel in time. We are not Yard Boys.'

'It is unclear to me,' Captain de Vienne said tersely. This hole in her memories infuriated her. Her sisters looked to her for guidance and she could give none. This was a weakness.

'It was a Grimmire,' Olivia said.

Captain de Vienne paused, unable to think clearly. The Grimmire were creatures of Destiny, she mused. They

worked to their own discreet plan, whatever that might be. What had a Grimmire been doing here? Why had it taken them to 2008, and then back here, to 1940? Her head throbbed.

‘What know you of the Grimmire?’ she bellowed, her dark eyes impaling each of the Paladin in turn. One by one they looked away.

‘I recall,’ Geneviève offered, her voice swallowed up by the room. ‘The memory is returning.’

Captain de Vienne paced with a barely hidden rage.

‘Our master,’ Geneviève continued unperturbed, ‘summoned a Grimmire.’

‘Why?’ Captain de Vienne spat. ‘Why would he take such a course? The Grimmire do not lightly trifle in the affairs of men.’

‘We sought the Rose,’ Olivia said meekly.

*The Rose.* Suddenly Alda de Vienne’s mind opened up to her, and the splintered memories revealed themselves.

The Rose of Annwn. It was the key to her master’s plans, a living form of enormous energy that resided in a human host. They had chased the scent of the Rose to 2008. It had been hidden. Hidden where? The memory was elusive and sly.

‘There is a boy,’ Geneviève said. ‘He has the Rose.’

The picture completed itself inside the captain’s mind. They had gone to 2008 in search of the Rose. It had been hidden by the boy’s mother. She had given it to her son to

heal him, so that he might live. 'The boy has the Rose.'

Olivia stepped closer. 'Where is our master? I cannot feel him.'

None of her sisters felt him, Captain de Vienne surmised. But they could *always* feel their master, they knew where he was at all times. But now he was gone from their world and the void inside her dark heart was vast. Captain de Vienne steadied herself as she remembered her master's fate.

'The boy. He was a Yard Boy,' she said as she tried to fortify her composure. 'He and Master Rouland disappeared downstream.'

'He is in the past?' Geneviève asked.

'There is no other explanation,' Captain de Vienne said.

'Then we must follow,' Olivia replied, suddenly filled with conviction.

'How?' Captain de Vienne asked angrily. 'Where should we go? *When?* We know nothing except that we travelled upstream to 2008 where our master fought a boy who wielded the Rose. The boy took Master Rouland back in time. We have been returned to 1940 without him. He is lost to us.'

Olivia gasped. 'Then all is hopeless?'

'No.' Captain de Vienne made a move to reassert her authority. 'We must first find the boy. The boy will lead us to Rouland.' A name grew in the captain's mind. '*Jack Morrow* is the key to our future.'

‘And how do you propose we find him?’ The voice was new and came from the dark recess of the chamber. It belonged to Dominica. She was pale and dark-haired, like all of the Paladin, but a streak of bold white zigzagged from her temple like a river of molten silver through her hair. Her frame was taller, thinner too, like an athlete’s. She approached Captain de Vienne slowly, her contempt for her leader barely hidden. ‘How do we find a boy who could be *anywhen* in time?’

Captain de Vienne’s eyes narrowed. She had no more answers to give. ‘This needs thought.’

‘We have no time for thought,’ Dominica replied, ‘or for pointless discussions in darkened holes. Our master needs us. We must act now.’ She turned to face her sisters, deliberately placing her back to Captain de Vienne. ‘The Morrow boy was not alone. The Exile was his ally.’

Olivia’s face broke into a smile of relief. ‘Yes, I recall now. Our fallen sister was with him.’

‘Eloise,’ Captain de Vienne said at last. Her mind had betrayed her. She was their captain, they looked to her for leadership, yet she was the last to recall what had happened. She was becoming old and weak.

‘Yes,’ Dominica said. ‘Eloise, our forgotten sister. She who defied our Master Rouland and was imprisoned. She is in league with the Morrow boy. She will lead us to him, and he will lead us to our master.’

‘But where is she?’ Geneviève asked.

Dominica closed her eyes and took a deep breath. 'She is close.' She held out her hands to Geneviève and Olivia. One by one the Paladin joined hands until only Captain de Vienne remained unconnected. Her rage boiled within. She wished to choke Dominica for her insolence. But now was not the time. She took her sisters' hands and closed her eyes.

Together, their minds as one, they saw their forsaken sister. Eloise was nearby, burning. Captain de Vienne ripped her hands free.

'Sisters,' she shouted. 'Ready yourselves for battle.'

As the others gathered their armour, Captain de Vienne summoned Dominica to her side.

'You will not join us,' she said.

Dominica's mouth opened, about to protest. The captain had expected this. She raised her hand and Dominica fell silent.

'I have another mission for you, something of great importance.'

Dominica's temper eased. 'Yes, Captain.'

'Our master is compromised. He may need to be revived. You must bring me Durendal.'

Dominica gasped. 'What you ask, it is impossible. Rouland hid the sword from all of us.'

'You refuse to help our master?' Captain de Vienne said sternly. 'In his hour of need?'

'No,' Dominica replied, some of her fire extinguished.

'But . . . where to begin?'

'The Widow will know.'

Dominica faltered, her eyes flashing like a trapped animal's. 'But she is . . . the Widow is insane—'

'Guard your words!' Captain de Vienne snapped. 'The Widow is to be revered. And she may be our only hope of resurrecting our master. If we cannot find the boy, if he does not lead us back to Rouland, the sword will. And if he is to prevail he will need Durendal. You cannot fail. Go to the Widow and find Durendal. Our discussion is at an end.'

'Yes, Captain,' Dominica said eventually.

'Take two sisters with you. Say nothing more here. Do you understand?'

Dominica nodded.

'Then go,' Captain de Vienne said. The thinnest of cold smiles danced upon her lips as Dominica turned to carry out her orders.