

ONE

I met Childe in the Monument to the Eighty.

It was one of those days when I had the place largely to myself, able to walk from aisle to aisle without seeing another visitor; only my footsteps disturbed the air of funereal silence and stillness.

I was visiting my parents' shrine. It was a modest affair: a smooth wedge of obsidian shaped like a metronome, undecorated save for two cameo portraits set in elliptical borders. The sole moving part was a black blade which was attached near the base of the shrine, ticking back and forth with magisterial slowness. Mechanisms buried inside the shrine ensured that it was winding down, destined to count out days and then years with each tick. Eventually it would require careful measurement to detect its movement.

I was watching the blade when a voice disturbed me.

'Visiting the dead again, Richard?'

'Who's there?' I said, looking around, faintly recognising the speaker but not immediately able to place him.

'Just another ghost.'

Various possibilities flashed through my mind as I listened to the man's deep and taunting voice - a kidnapping, an assassination - before I stopped flattering myself that I was worthy of such attention.

Then the man emerged from between two shrines a little way down from the metronome.

'My God,' I said.

'Now do you recognise me?'

He smiled and stepped closer: as tall and imposing as I remembered. He had lost the devil's horns since our last meeting - they had only ever been a bio-engineered affectation - but there was still something satanic about his appearance, an effect not lessened by the small and slightly pointed goatee he had cultivated in the meantime.

Dust swirled around him as he walked towards me, suggesting that he was not a projection.

'I thought you were dead, Roland.'

'No, Richard,' he said, stepping close enough to shake my hand. 'But that was most certainly the effect I desired to achieve.'

'Why?' I said.

'Long story.'

'Start at the beginning, then.'

Roland Childe placed a hand on the smooth side of my parents' shrine. 'Not quite your style, I'd have thought?'

'It was all I could do to argue against something even more ostentatious and morbid. But don't change the subject. What happened to you?'