



The EMPEROR of ALL THINGS

**England 1758, a nation at war. A race to find a device that
could change the course of history . . . and of time itself.**

Paul Witcover

About the Book

1758. The Age of Enlightenment. Yet the advance of reason has not brought peace. England is embroiled in a war that stretches from her North American colonies to Europe and beyond. Across the channel the French prepare to invade . . .

Daniel Quare is a journeyman of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers. He is also a Regulator – member of a secret order within the guild tasked with seeking out horological innovations that could give England the upper hand over her enemies.

Now Quare's superiors have heard tell of a singular device – a pocket watch rumoured to possess properties that have more to do with magic than with any known science. But Quare soon learns that he is not alone in searching for this strange and sinister timepiece. He is pursued by a French spy who will stop at nothing to fetch the prize back to his masters. And a mysterious thief known only as Grimalkin seeks the watch as well, for purposes equally enigmatic.

Daniel's path is full of adventure, intrigue, betrayal and murder – and it will lead him from the world he knows to an other-where of demigods and dragons in which nothing is as it seems . . . Time least of all.

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

Part One

Prologue

1. Honour

2. Master Mephistopheles

3. Three Questions

4. Pig and Rooster

5. Impossible Things

6. Gears Within Gears

7. Lord Wichcote

Part Two

8. Wachter's Folly

9. Herr Doppler

10. Corinna

11. A World Newly Born

12. The Cogwheel Sun

13. The Productions of Time

Part Three

14. The Otherwhere

15. Tiamat

16. A Whole Different Order of Drowning

17. The Song of the Hunter

18. What the Cats Dragged In

19. Magic of a Most Ordinary Kind

Epilogue

About the Author

Also by Paul Witcover

Copyright

THE EMPEROR OF ALL THINGS

Book 1 of
The Productions of Time



PAUL WITCOVER

For Cynthia Babak
and
Christopher Schelling

Eternity is in love with the productions of time.
– William Blake, *Proverbs of Hell*

You shall swear to be true to our Sovereign Lord the King's Majesty, his heirs and successors, and at all times obedient to the Master and Wardens of this Fellowship and Society, and their successors after them, in all honest and lawful things touching the affairs of this Fellowship. You shall be ready at all manner of Summons, and bear scot and lot in all manner of reasonable contributions of and to this Fellowship, and the Fellowship of the Company of Clockmakers of the City of London you shall to the best of your skill, power and ability, uphold and maintain. You shall not know nor suspect any manner of meetings, conspiracies, plots, devices against the King's Majesty, his heirs or successors, or the Government of this Fellowship, but you shall the same to the utmost of your power, let and hinder and speedily disclose to the Master or one of the Wardens of this Society. And this City of London and Fellowship of Clockmakers you shall keep harmless, as much as in you lieth: also you shall be ready at all times to be at the Quarter Days, and every other assembly, matter or cause that you shall be warned or called unto for the affairs of this Fellowship, unless you shall have lawful or reasonable excuse in that behalf. And all other Ordinances of this Fellowship or Society, ratified according to the laws of this Realm, or otherwise lawful for this Fellowship or Society to make and ordain, you shall, to the utmost of your power well and truly submit yourself unto and keep. So help you God.

- Oath of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers

PART ONE



Prologue

CLOCKS. CLOCKS EVERYWHERE, on the wooden shelves and tables, even upon the sawdust-covered floor of the attic room: clocks of all shapes and sizes limned in the light of a gibbous moon that did not so much pierce the skylight as sift through its sooty glass – tall clocks in finely carved and polished casings of exotic woods with brass pendulums winking back and forth; ornate mantel clocks of ormolu and mahogany, marble and tortoiseshell; clocks of gold and silver set into or alongside precious metal and porcelain renderings of human figures in varied states of dress and undress as well as representations of beasts real and fabulous: lions consorting with unicorns, eagles and gryphons roosting side by side; cuckoo clocks and carriage clocks and tambour clocks and skeleton clocks; even pocket watches with their chains and ribbons neatly coiled or dangling free and loose as slipped lanyards. The ticking of so many timepieces, no two synchronized, filled the space with a facsimile of whispered conversation, as if some ghostly parliament were meeting in the dead of night.

Scattered among the clocks were glass flasks and vials of assorted shapes and sizes, some containing clear or opaque liquids, others quite empty, along with mortars and pestles, iron tongs, funnels, crucibles, and other such instruments bespeaking the practice of alchemy. Set in a row along one wall were three brick furnaces, one in the shape of a tower and as tall as a man, the other two smaller and squat in shape, like ornamental toads.

A mouse was making its way across the surface of one table, nosing amid a clutter of clock parts and tools: pins, clicks, rivets, coiled springs, tweezers, clamps, winders, files, and like essentials of the horologist's trade. Every so often it rose off its tiny front paws to sniff the air, whiskers twitching, eyes aglitter like apple seeds in a bed of ash.

From a shelf overhead, a black cat followed its progress with glowing tourmaline eyes. The noise in the back of its throat, somewhere between a growl and a purr, was cloaked by the gossiping muttering of the clocks. The tip of its tail lashed from side to side like a metronome.

When the meanderings of the mouse brought it conveniently near, the cat moved with the grace of a gliding shadow, seeming as insubstantial ... until it struck. In leaping to the table top, it did not disturb a single item yet knocked the rodent onto its side, pressing the half-stunned creature down with one paw and slashing with its teeth at the grey fur.

The cat tensed and flattened at a sound from overhead: a faint click followed by a drawn-out creaking, as if the old house were settling on its foundations. Hissing, the cat darted a glance upwards as a thin rope dropped through the now-open skylight to dangle above the floor a few feet away. The rope had not reached the end of its length before the cat bolted, with less stealth or silence than just moments before; small gears and other items scattered under its paws as it fled into the shadows. An empty vial slipped to the floor and shattered. The mouse was long gone. Drops of its blood glistened on the table, dark as oil.

A svelte figure slid down the rope and dropped soundlessly to the floor. The intruder was dressed in grey: soft grey boots, grey breeches, a grey shirt beneath a grey cloak. Strapped to its back was a small crossbow, and a blade as slender as a rapier yet no longer than a short sword hung in a grey scabbard from its belt, as did six leather pouches, also grey. A grey kerchief pulled across

the nose hid the bottom half of the face; a grey hood cloaked the upper; in between, eyes as dark as the mouse's glittered as they probed the shadowy corners of the room. The intruder strode to one of the tables.

The timepieces on this particular table were clearly the work of master craftsmen. Many were made with precious metals; not a few were inset with jewels. A single one of these clocks, selected at random, would have made a rich prize for a thief. Yet the grey-clad figure reached without hesitation for a mantel clock that appeared as out of place as an ordinary goblet set alongside the Holy Grail.

At a whisper of displaced air, the intruder turned, clock in one hand, the rapier-like blade in the other.

The casing of a tall clock some twelve feet away swung open. Out stepped a gentleman of middling height wearing a powdered wig and an elegant sky-blue coat over a lace-adorned white shirt and embroidered waistcoat, yellow breeches with pale blue hose, and embroidered green silk slippers. His powdered face glowed corpse white in the moonlight; a conspicuous beauty mark adorned his left cheek, and his lips were as red as cherries half sunk in a bowl of cream. He had the look of extreme age masquerading as youth ... or perhaps it was the other way around. But the most striking feature of his appearance was the cocked duelling pistol that he held in the most negligent manner imaginable, as though it was by the merest chance that this object happened to be pointing at the breast of the intruder. 'So good of you to drop in, Grimalkin,' he drawled.

The hooded figure executed a slight but meticulous bow. 'Lord Wichcote.'

'I had thought you retired - or dead.'

'Merely ... elsewhere. Now, as you see, I have returned.'

'And come to pay me a visit. I'm honoured. But my guests generally call at the front door. Many of them are

thieves, it is true, but few take the trouble to mask themselves. Are you a coward, sir?’

‘Simply modest, my lord,’ answered the one addressed as Grimalkin.

‘Why, damn me if you are not a smooth-tongued rascal! But I will see who is beneath that mask.’ He gestured with the pistol. ‘Remove it, sir.’

‘As your lordship can see, my hands are occupied at present.’

‘Then I suggest you un-occupy them.’

‘Gladly, but your pistol is making me somewhat nervous.’

‘Afraid it might go off? You should be.’

‘I am more concerned that, in my nervousness, I might drop the clock.’

The tremor that shook the hand holding the pistol was evident in the man’s voice as well. ‘If you damage that clock, sir, I will kill you.’

‘Such is already your intent, is it not?’

‘Even if it were, some deaths are less pleasant than others. Now, set the clock down, sir. Gently.’

‘Since you will shoot me the instant I do so, that would be most foolish.’

‘Perhaps I will shoot you in any case.’

‘I think not. Even a steady hand is no guarantee of accuracy at this distance, in this poor light, and your hand is far from steady. Should you fire, you are as likely to strike the clock as to strike me. And if you do strike me, why, then I will drop the clock after all, and your precious timepiece will suffer the very damage you seek to avoid.’

‘I would sooner see it destroyed than give it up to you and your masters.’

‘I serve no masters,’ Grimalkin stated.

This provoked a laugh. ‘Come now, sir. It is common knowledge that you are, or at any rate used to be, an agent of those confounded meddlers, the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers.’

‘Common knowledge often masks uncommon ignorance.’

‘Hmph. How else would you know the value of that particular timepiece?’

‘Why, half of London knows it, sir, the way you have been broadcasting your acquisition of it! Indeed, the wonder is that no one has got here before me.’

‘It was to entice you to my workshop that I spoke so freely,’ Lord Wichcote said. ‘I had heard rumours of your return, and wished to see for myself.’

‘That was obvious. Still, I am nothing if not curious. And so I accepted your lordship’s invitation. I take it you are not normally in the habit of leaving the skylight unlocked, or your treasures unguarded.’

‘Most assuredly not.’

Grimalkin bowed again, making a mocking flourish with the blade, then straightened and said: ‘In that case, put up your pistol, sir. I do not think you have gone to so much trouble merely to kill me.’

Lord Wichcote cackled. ‘I like you, sir, damned if I do not!’ He kept the pistol pointed at the other’s chest, however. ‘Very well then: to business. It happens that I am an admirer of your peculiar talents. I have followed your career, if I may term it such, with avid interest, despite your efforts to cover your trail. Your pursuit of rare and unusual timepieces has led you from far Cathay to the New World and everywhere in between. The mysterious Grimalkin – the grey shadow whose identity is known to no man! Some say you are of noble, even royal blood. Others maintain you are naught but a brash commoner. Still others hold that you are no man at all, but a devil sworn to the service of Lucifer.’

Grimalkin shrugged. ‘People say many things, my lord. One grows weary of idle talk.’

‘Then I shall come straight to the point. I wish to employ you as my confidential agent, sir. Whatever the Worshipful

Company is paying you, I shall double it. They need never know.'

'I have told you that I am not in the service of that guild.'

'Who then?' A look of repugnance, as if an offensive odour had wafted into the room, came over the powdered features. 'Surely not the Frogs?'

'I serve no master,' Grimalkin repeated. 'Not English, not French. None.'

Lord Wichcote smirked, revealing teeth as yellow as aged ivory. 'Every man serves a master, my dear Grimalkin. Whether king or commoner, all of us bend the knee to someone or something.'

'And who is your master, my lord?'

'Why, His Majesty, of course. And Almighty God.'

'So say you. Yet by the laws of His Majesty, only the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers has the right to such a workshop as this.'

The man bristled. 'Do you take me for a shopkeeper, sir? A common artisan? I am a peer of the realm! Such petty restrictions do not apply to the likes of me. Nor do I claim exemption on the grounds of rank alone. I am a natural scientist. An investigator into the secret nature of the most elusive and mysterious of all substances in God's creation. I refer, of course, to time. That is our true master, is it not, Grimalkin? *Tempus Rerum Imperator*, as the Worshipful Company has it. Time, the emperor of all things.'

'Not of me.'

'You would be time's master?' Lord Wichcote laughed. 'You have the heart of a rebel, I find. Well, no matter. Worship who or what you will, or nothing at all, if it please you. I care only for my collection and my experiments. With your help, Grimalkin, that collection can be the finest in the world, and the fruit of my labours can be yours to share.'

'What fruit?'

'The very distillate of time, sir.'

‘You seek immortality?’

Lord Wichcote twitched the barrel of the pistol in a dismissive fashion. ‘That is the least of it. What men call time is the mind of God in its most subtle manifestation. Its purest essence, if you will. Imagine the potency of that divine essence, distilled into an elixir! To drink of it would be to become as God Himself.’

Now it was Grimalkin’s turn to laugh. ‘And you call *me* a rebel?’

‘I had hoped that you, of all men, might understand.’

‘Oh, I understand very well, my lord. Very well indeed. How much of this fabulous elixir have you managed to distil thus far?’

Lord Wichcote frowned. ‘Certain ... difficulties in the refining process remain to be overcome, but—’

‘In other words, none,’ Grimalkin interrupted. ‘I thought as much. Alas, I fear I must decline your offer.’

‘Do not be hasty. You will not find a more generous patron. My fortune is vast, my influence at court vaster still. All I require to succeed are various timepieces that I regret to say are beyond my reach at present. My reach, but not yours.’

‘Your confidence is flattering. But the only collection that interests me is my own. As for this elixir of yours, it smacks more of alchemy than natural science. I do not believe that you have the skill to make it, nor even that it can be made.’

‘Is that your final answer?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

Lord Wichcote sighed. ‘A pity. But not entirely unexpected.’ He pulled the trigger of the duelling pistol. There was a spark, a roar, a cloud of smoke that reeked of sulphur.

Grimalkin flinched as the clock, struck, was torn free of the hand that held it.

At the same instant, the front panels of three other tall clocks swung open. From each emerged a man with a drawn rapier. One to Grimalkin's right; another to the left; the third stood beside Lord Wichcote, who seemed vastly amused.

'The clock,' he said, 'was of course a facsimile only.'

'I am relieved to hear it,' said Grimalkin, flexing the fingers of a now-empty hand. 'Your lordship is a most excellent shot.'

'I spend an hour each day at target practice.' As he spoke, Lord Wichcote began the laborious process of reloading his pistol. 'I want him alive,' he added, addressing the three swordsmen without bothering to look up. 'And take care you do not damage any of my timepieces in the process.'

'Aye, m'lud,' chorused the new arrivals. Rapiers held en garde, they converged on the intruder with the wary grace of professionals; they were met by a grey blur. The music of swordplay filled the room, providing a lively accompaniment to the stolid ticking of so many clocks.

Preoccupied with the pistol, it was some seconds before Lord Wichcote, in response to a groan that seemed more a product of dismay than pain, glanced up to gauge the progress of the fight. There were now two men facing the masked intruder; the third was sprawled on the floor, a rose blooming on his chest. Frowning, Lord Wichcote returned to his work, a certain agitation visible in his movements. When next he glanced up, the intruder was facing but a single man. Lord Wichcote's efforts now took on an unmistakable urgency, accompanied by a marked deterioration in manual dexterity. Gunpowder spilled over his shirt, and the ball he was trying to insert into the pistol's muzzle seemed possessed of a perverse desire to go elsewhere. At last he rammed it home. But no sooner had he done so than he found the red-stained tip of a blade hovering near his throat.

‘Perhaps you should devote more time in your practice sessions to the loading rather than the firing of your pistols,’ Grimalkin suggested, somewhat breathlessly.

‘No doubt you have a point,’ Lord Wichcote conceded through gritted teeth.

‘Indeed I do. And you will become more intimately acquainted with my point unless you drop your pistol.’

The pistol dropped.

Grimalkin kicked the weapon aside.

‘You would not dare to shed even a single drop of my blood,’ Lord Wichcote declared, though he did not sound convinced of it. The powder on his face was streaked with sweat. The skin underneath was neither so white nor so smooth.

‘Would I not?’ The tip of the blade indented his throat, where the skin was as yellowed – and as thin – as ancient parchment. A red bead appeared there.

The man gasped but said nothing more.

‘Give me your parole, as a gentleman and a peer of the realm, that you will not cry out or otherwise attempt to impede me, and I will take my leave without doing you graver injury.’ Grimalkin pulled the blade back a fraction of an inch.

‘You have it,’ Lord Wichcote said.

As Grimalkin retreated a step, still holding the blade ready, the other pressed a white handkerchief to his throat and said in a tone of deepest disapproval, ‘What manner of fencing do you call that, sir? Three of my finest swordsmen dispatched in under two minutes! I have never seen a man wield a blade in such an outlandish fashion!’

‘I have travelled widely, my lord, and learned much along the way – not all of it to do with clocks.’ Grimalkin leaned forward to wipe the blade clean on the edge of his lordship’s sky-blue coat, then returned it to its scabbard.

This affront Lord Wichcote bore with barely controlled fury. ‘Do you know, Grimalkin, I don’t believe you are a

gentleman at all.'

'I have never claimed that distinction. And now, sir, I bid you adieu.' Grimalkin gave another precise bow and backed away, moving towards the rope that dangled from the open skylight. In passing a table bestrewn with timepieces in various stages of assembly and disassembly – the very table, as it happened, where cat and mouse had earlier disported themselves – Grimalkin paused. A grey-gloved hand shot out.

Lord Wichcote gave a wordless cry.

'I'll take this for my trouble.' A clock very like the one that had been the target of the gentleman's pistol disappeared into the folds of Grimalkin's cloak – as, moving more swiftly still, like a liquid shadow, did the mouse that had escaped the cat. 'Did you really think you could hide it from me?'

The gentleman's only reply was to begin shouting for help at the top of his lungs.

'I don't know what England is coming to when the parole of a lord cannot be trusted by an honest thief,' Grimalkin muttered, reaching into a belt pouch. A small glass vial glittered in an upraised hand, then was flung to the floor. Thick clouds of smoke boiled up, filling the room.

By the time the air in the attic had cleared, the masked intruder stood on an empty rooftop half a mile away. Tendrils of fog and coal smoke eeled through the streets below, but a strong breeze, carrying the effluvial reek of the Thames, had swept the rooftops clear. Grimalkin fished out the timepiece and turned it this way and that in the silvery light of the moon. The exterior was unremarkable.

The whiskered nose of the mouse peeked out inquisitively from the collar of the grey hood.

'Well, Henrietta,' whispered the thief. 'Let us see what hatches out of—'

A muffled footfall. Grimalkin spun, blade already sliding from scabbard ...

Too late. With a sharp crack, the hilt of a rapier slammed into the side of the grey hood. The thief crumpled without another word.

1

Honour

DANIEL QUARE, JOURNEYMAN of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers and confidential agent of the Most Secret and Exalted Order of Regulators, stood in flickering candlelight and listened to the synchronized ticking of the dozens of timepieces that filled the room. The longer he listened, the more the sound suggested the marching of a vast insect army to his weary yet overstimulated brain. He could picture it clearly, row upon row of black ants, as many of them as the number of seconds ordained from the Creation until the Last Judgement. He felt as though he had been standing here for a substantial part of that time already. His injured leg, which had stiffened overnight, throbbed painfully.

Before him was an oaken desk of such prodigious dimensions that a scout from that ant army might have spent a considerable portion of its life journeying from one side to the other. An immensely fat man wearing a powdered wig and a dark blue greatcoat sat across the desk from him in a high-backed wooden chair of thronelike proportions. The windowless room was stifling, with a fire burning in a tiled fireplace set into one wall amid shelves filled with clocks and leather-bound books. It might have been the dead of winter and not midway through an unseasonably warm September. Quare was sweating profusely.

So was the man behind the desk. The play of light across his features made it appear as if invisible fingers were moulding the soft wax of his face. At one moment he seemed a well-preserved man of sixty, flush with vigour; in the next, he had aged a good twenty years; and which of these two impressions, if either, struck closest to the truth, Quare did not know. Moisture dripped from the man's round, red, flabby-jowled face, yet he made no move to wipe the sweat away or to divest himself of his powdered wig or greatcoat, as if oblivious to the heat, to everything save the disassembled clock spread out before him. He examined its innards closely, hunched over the desktop and squinting through a loupe as he wielded a variety of slender metal tools with the dexterity of a surgeon. Jewelled rings flashed on the plump sausages of his fingers. Occasionally, without glancing up, he reached out to shift the position of a large silver and crystal candelabrum, drawing it closer or pushing it away. His breathing was laboured, as if from strenuous physical activity, and was interspersed with low grunts of inscrutable import.

Quare had been ushered into the room by a servant who'd announced him in a mournful voice, bowed low, and departed. Not once in the interminable moments since had the man behind the desk looked up or acknowledged his presence in any way, though Quare had cleared his throat more than once. He did so again now.

The man raised his head with the slow deliberation of a tortoise. The loupe dropped from an eye as round and blue as a cephalopod's. It came to rest, suspended on a fine silver chain, upon the mountainous swell of the man's belly. He scrunched his eyes shut and then opened them wide, as if he were in some doubt as to the substantiality of the young man before him. 'Ah, Journeyman Quare,' he wheezed at last. 'Been expecting you.'

Quare gave a stiff bow. 'Grandmaster Wolfe.'

The grandmaster waved a massive hand like a king commanding a courtier. 'Sit you down, sir, sit you down. You must be weary after last night's exertions.'

That was an understatement. Quare had returned to the guild hall late, and had not repaired to his own lodgings, and to bed, until even later – only to be summoned back two hours ago, at just past eight in the morning. Still, that was more sleep than Grandmaster Wolfe had managed, by the look of him. Quare perched on the edge of an armchair so lavishly upholstered and thickly pillowed he feared it might swallow him if he relaxed into its embrace.

'Comfortable, are you?' inquired Grandmaster Wolfe with the same look of sceptical curiosity he had worn while examining the clock. He seemed to be considering the possibility that Quare was a timekeeping mechanism ... and a flawed one at that, in need of repair.

'Yes, thank you, Sir Thaddeus.'

'Hmph.' The man took a ready-filled long-stemmed clay pipe from a stand on the desk. He touched a spill to the flame of one of the candles in the candelabrum and held it above the bowl, puffing fiercely. Grey smoke wreathed his flushed and perspiring face.

Quare waited. Sir Thaddeus Wolfe, who had led the Worshipful Company for more than thirty years, was notoriously difficult to please. The fact that Quare had completed his mission successfully was no guarantee of praise from the man who masters and journeymen alike referred to – though never to his face – as the Old Wolf.

'You were dispatched to secure a certain timepiece,' Wolfe said now, speaking in a measured tone, like a barrister setting out the facts of a case. 'A timepiece illegally in the possession of a gentleman whose connections at Court precluded a more ... direct approach. Thanks to your efforts, that clock, and its secrets, now belong to us. And yet, a greater prize was within your grasp. Do you take my meaning, sir?'

'I do.'

'Has it a name, this prize?'

Quare did not hesitate. 'Grimalkin.'

'Grimalkin,' the Old Wolf echoed with a growl that sent smoke billowing from between his lips. 'Our enemies have no more skilful agent than that cursed man. For all his absurd affectations - the grey clothing, the mask, the infernal devices, the ridiculous name itself - he has never failed his masters ... until now. You, sir, a mere neophyte but recently admitted to the active ranks of our Most Secret and Exalted Order, achieved what your more experienced brethren have long dreamed of accomplishing. You tracked Grimalkin, took him by surprise, rendered him unconscious. And then ... did you kill him?'

'No.'

'Did you, perhaps, question him?'

'I did not.'

'No, you did neither of these things. May I ask why you chose to spare the enemy of your guild, your king, and your country?'

Quare frowned. He had expected the question, and had prepared an answer, but he had hoped his success in procuring the timepiece would have earned him a measure of leniency. 'As you say, Grimalkin was unconscious. To kill him under the circumstances would have been cold-blooded murder. It would not have been honourable.'

Alarming quantities of smoke poured from between the grandmaster's lips and jetted from his nostrils. 'And was it also a consideration of honour that prevented you from peeking beneath the rascal's mask to discover his identity?'

'It did not seem the act of a gentleman,' Quare affirmed. His words sounded foolish even to his own ears.

'A gentleman, is it?' The smoke grew denser still. 'I was under the impression that I had dispatched a spy.'

'I hope I may still comport myself as befits a gentleman.'

A choking sound emerged from the old man, and he spat out upon the desk what Quare at first took to be a tooth but then realized was the tip of the pipe stem, bitten off. Grandmaster Wolfe flung the ruined pipe down to one side of the exposed clockworks, sending a scattering of coals across the desktop; burn marks on the wood indicated that this was not the first time he had done so. 'Dolt!' he thundered, red-faced. 'Imbecile! You will comport yourself in whatever manner best advances the interests of His Majesty and this guild!' Then, his voice tightly controlled, he continued: 'As to considerations of honour, Mr Quare, allow me to instruct you, as it appears Master Magnus has been lax in seeing to your education on this point. A regulator must be many things. A gentleman, yes, if circumstances warrant. But also a thief. An assassin. Or a cold-blooded murderer. In short, sir, a chameleon. A regulator does not have the luxury of weighing his actions against abstract notions of gentlemanly honour – notions which, in any case, do not apply to you, as neither your present rank of journeyman nor your condition as bastard entitles you to claim them. Is that clear?'

'Yes, Grandmaster,' said Quare. But inside he was seething; how long would his bastardy be held against him? Would nothing he achieved be sufficient to weigh against it? Oh, to discover the name of his true father, the cowardly blackguard! If he could but solve that riddle, he would pay the man a visit, no matter how high his rank, and demand acknowledgement ... or satisfaction.

'And what of putting Grimalkin to the question while he was in your power?' the Old Wolf went on meanwhile. 'How, may I ask, did that offend your fine scruples?'

'It did not. I merely thought it was more important that I return with the timepiece, in case he had associates near by, ready to come to his aid. I did bind him, and made report of where I had left him as soon as I returned to the guild hall.'

‘And by the time we dispatched a team to the rooftop, the villain was long gone.’ The Old Wolf took a fresh pipe from the stand on his desk and lit it with the spill. ‘You are talented, Mr Quare. When it comes to the horological arts, you are most promising. But I find myself questioning whether you have the temperament to be an effective regulator.’

‘I—’

‘How old are you, sir?’ Grandmaster Wolfe interrupted through puffs of smoke.

‘Twenty-one,’ Quare admitted.

‘That is young for a regulator.’

‘Master Magnus did not think so when he recruited me for the Order.’

‘I remember his report. I thought that he was being overhasty, bringing you along too quickly. Patience is not among Magnus’s many virtues. Still, he argued your case persuasively, and in the end I gave approval for your induction. I feel now that I may have been mistaken.’

‘Begging your pardon, Sir Thaddeus, but that is most unjust!’ The words were out before Quare could consider the wisdom of saying them. ‘I completed the mission successfully, despite the unforeseen complication of Grimalkin! I brought back the clock, and you must have noted the innovation to the verge escapement ...’

‘In this business, Mr Quare, a missed opportunity can be worse than outright failure,’ answered the Old Wolf. ‘As in a game of chess, when a player blunders and puts his queen in jeopardy, only a fool passes up the chance to sweep that lady from the board. As for the escapement, I am surprised to hear you mention it. That is not your affair. You were dispatched to gain possession of a timepiece, not to plumb its secrets. Your orders were explicit on that point, were they not?’

‘I-I merely wished to make certain it had not been damaged,’ Quare stammered.

‘Do not compound the severity of your transgression by inventing feeble excuses. You know very well that the secrets of this particular clock were reserved for the masters of the guild alone.’

‘A moment ago, you criticized me for not displaying initiative. Yet now it seems you would prefer me to follow my orders to the letter, without departing from them in any respect whatsoever!’

‘That is a specious argument, sir.’ The Old Wolf jabbed the end of his pipe towards Quare. ‘Save such pettifoggery for the barristers, if you please. The difference is this: in the former case, you would have been acting in the interests of your king and your guild, while in the latter, you were merely satisfying your own curiosity and ambition. There is a time for initiative and a time for obedience, and you need to start distinguishing between the two if you ever hope to rise above the rank of journeyman, my lad. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Abundantly,’ said Quare.

The old man puffed at his pipe for a moment, then sighed. ‘Well, what’s done is done. You have seen what you have seen. I would hear your opinion.’

‘I-I didn’t examine the escapement in detail ...’

‘The truth, sir, I pray you.’

Quare cleared his throat. ‘The innovation to the mechanism is clever but not significant. It is an elegant if somewhat impractical solution to a problem that others are close to solving. In truth, I was surprised; it didn’t seem substantial enough to account for the urgency of my mission or the interest of Grimalkin. I can only assume I missed something.’

The Old Wolf gave a phlegmatic chuckle. ‘You missed nothing. Your assessment is entirely correct. When Lord Wichcote began to boast of his recent acquisition, claiming that it represented an astonishing breakthrough in the horological arts, we had no choice but to act with dispatch,

sending the only regulator available, despite your regrettable lack of experience. Who controls the measurement of time controls the world, Mr Quare. It is imperative that every major horological advance become the exclusive property of this guild ... and, through us, of His Majesty. Luckily, Wichcote is as deficient in his knowledge of horology as in his exercise of discretion.' He waved the pipe over the disassembled clockworks like a priest dispensing a blessing of incense over a corpse. 'As you point out, the innovation to the escapement is clever but no more than that. Spying, like clockmaking, is unfortunately an imprecise art.'

'Then it was for nothing.'

'Nothing?' Grandmaster Wolfe shook his head; a fine dust of powder sifted down from his wig to settle on the shoulders of his greatcoat. 'Every scrap of knowledge is valuable in itself. And consider that Grimalkin did not have an opportunity to examine the clock. The fact that it was stolen from him before he could do so will only support the rumour that it embodied some grand stroke of genius. Our enemies will now assume that we possess this knowledge, and we can use their assumption, mistaken though it may be, to our advantage.'

'So I was right after all not to kill him.'

'That we can turn your failure to good account does not excuse it. I would rather have Grimalkin dead than possess a thousand clever clocks. Yet it's possible his masters will dispatch him to retrieve the clock or to learn its secrets. In that case, we may have the opportunity to rectify your mistake.'

'Surely not even Grimalkin would dare to come here!'

'Perhaps not. But as long as we have the proper bait, we may lay a trap for him wherever we please. And this time, I dare say, that grey-suited rogue will not escape.'

'I hope I will be allowed the chance to redeem my honour.'

‘There is that detestable word again,’ said the Old Wolf with a sour grimace. ‘No, Mr Quare, I think you’ve had enough of honour for now. Perhaps it is best that you put aside the cloak and dagger of the regulator and return for a time to a typical journeyman’s life. There you may learn the value of obedience.’

Quare had thought himself prepared for the blow, yet it was a moment before he found his voice again. ‘Am I expelled from the Order, then?’

‘Suspended, rather. You need a bit of seasoning, I find. Some added experience under your belt before you can be trusted with the responsibilities of membership in the Most Secret and Exalted Order of Regulators.’

Quare stood, hands clenched at his sides. ‘If you would give me another chance ...’

Grandmaster Wolfe studied him through impassive blue eyes. ‘I am giving you that chance, sir, provided you have the wit to take it.’ He waved the pipe stem in the direction of the door. ‘You are dismissed.’

Quare bowed more stiffly than before, turned, and stalked from the stifling room.

A servant waited outside. Guild hall servants dressed in identical livery, wore identical wigs, even had identical expressions painted on their identically powdered faces, making it difficult if not impossible to tell them apart, especially since they were all of middling heft and height, as if cast from the same mould. There was an ongoing conflict between the journeymen of the guild and its servants, a kind of low-grade class warfare that took place within well-defined boundaries and was fought with weapons of juvenile provocation, on the one hand, and, on the other, a sangfroid so impermeable as to verge on the inhuman. Indeed, Quare’s friend and fellow journeyman Pickens maintained, not entirely facetiously, that the servants were not human beings at all but automatons,

sophisticated mechanical devices crafted by the masters, golems of natural science.

‘Master Magnus wishes to see you, sir,’ the servant intoned. His powdered face, rouged lips, and pale blue livery put Quare in mind of a well-spoken carp.

Quare gestured for the servant to precede him, then limped in his wake. Candles set in wall sconces cast a murky, tremulous light, like moonlight sifting into a sunken ship. Quare always felt a peculiar shortness of breath here in the guild hall, as if the presence of so many clocks had concentrated time itself, causing a change of state analogous to the condensation of a gas into a liquid. He even thought he could smell it – time, that is: an odour composed of smoke and wax and human sweat, of ancient wood, and stone more ancient still, of lives forgotten but not entirely vanished, ghostly remnants of all those who had walked these halls.

Dark oil paintings of guild masters and grandmasters from the last three hundred and fifty years glowered down at him from the walls of the narrow hallway like Old Testament prophets. *Bastard*, he imagined them sneering. *Failure*. Now he must face the judgement of Master Magnus.

Magnus and the Old Wolf were rivals for power, each believing that he and he alone knew the best way to shepherd the Worshipful Company through these perilous times. Grandmaster Wolfe clung to the past, to the guild’s traditional prerogatives, as a bulwark against the uncertainties of change, while Magnus championed a future in which innovation, rather than hoarded knowledge, would be the guarantor of the guild’s wealth and influence. Each man had his followers, but Quare – although his personal sympathies were with Master Magnus – had done his best to steer a middle course between them, knowing that the key to advancement lay in keeping his options open. He had no father or family to look to for support and